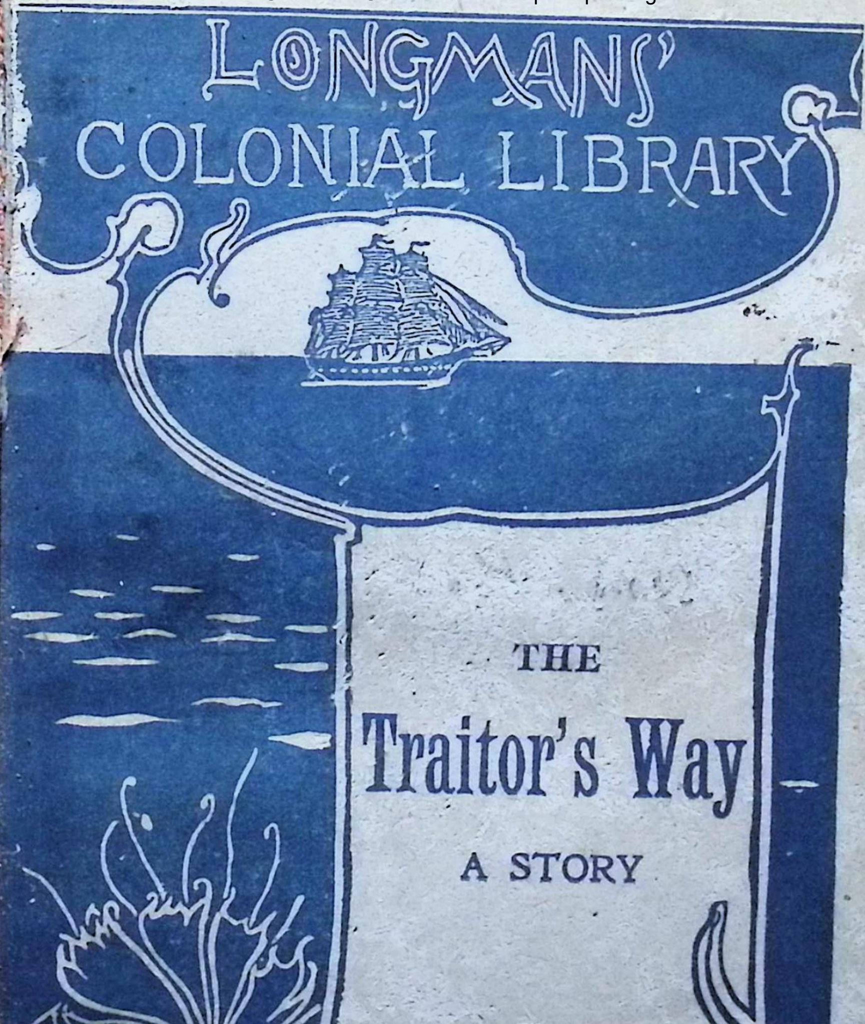

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A STORY

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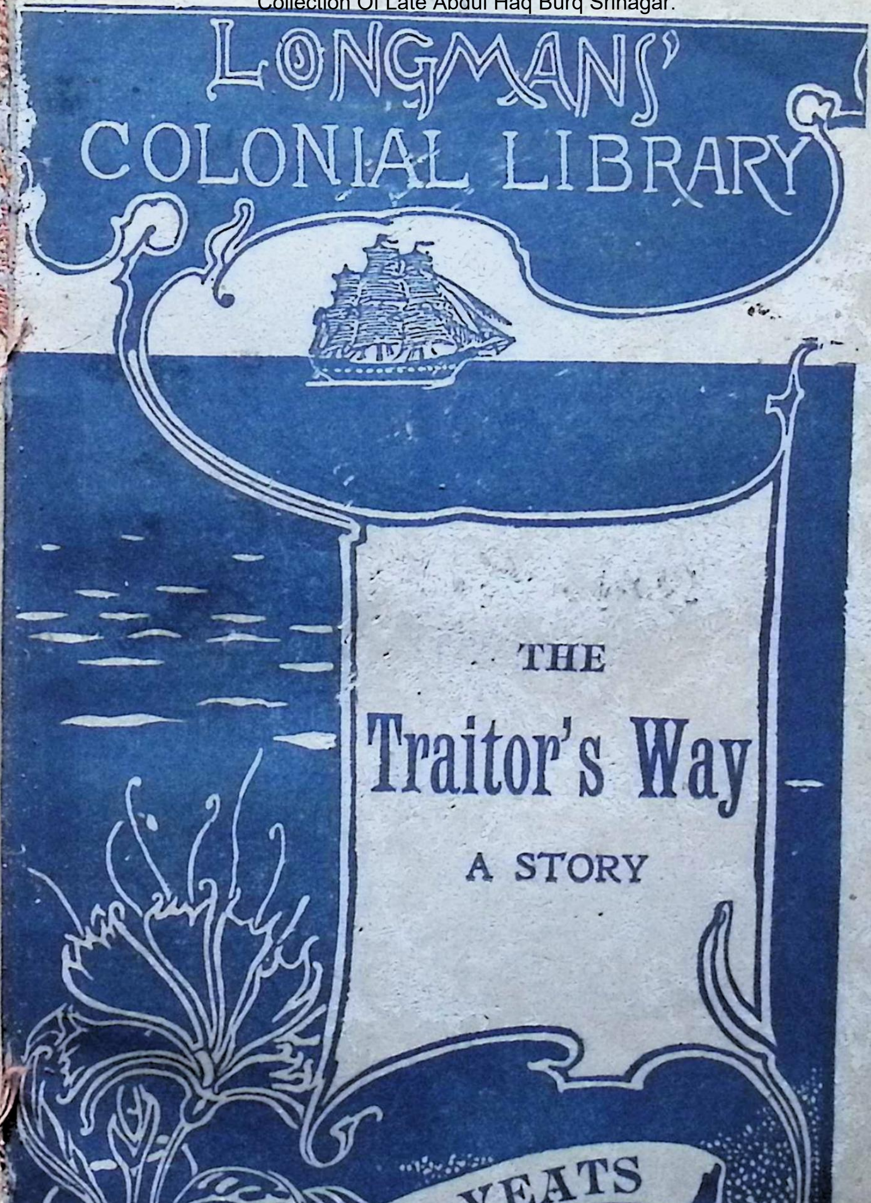

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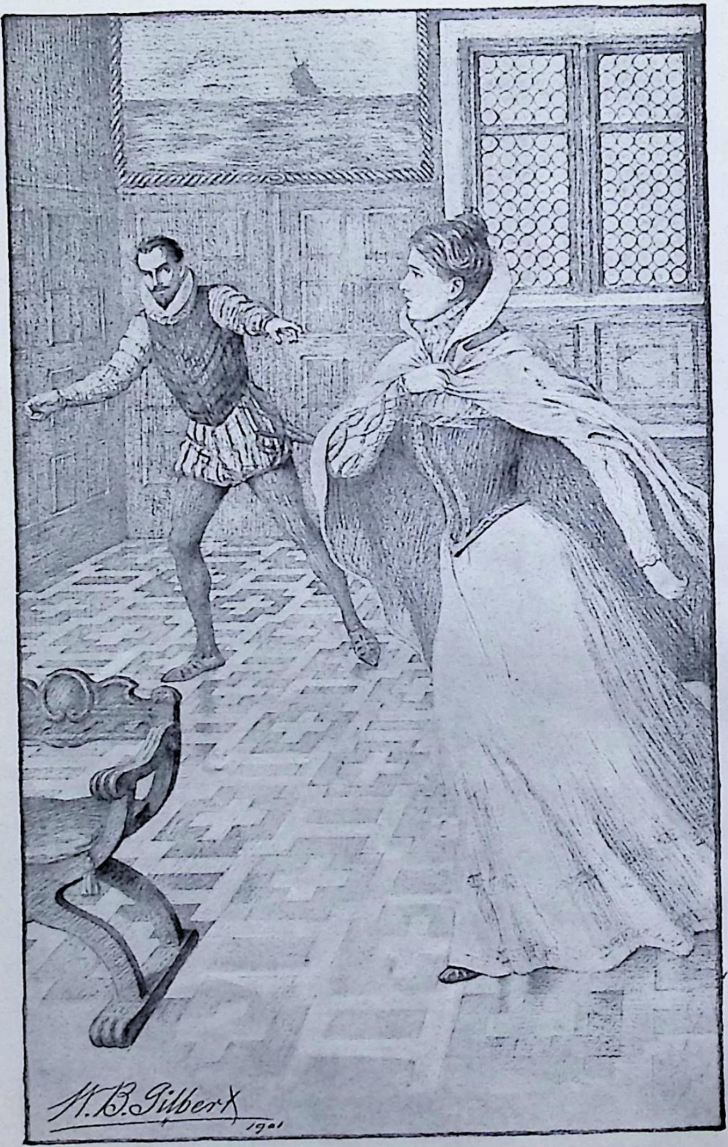
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"QUICK!" I WHISPERED; "OPEN THE DOOR BEYOND, AND GO OUT BY THE PRIVATE WAY."—*Page* 8.

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THE TRAITOR'S WAY

A STORY

BY

S. LEVETT-YEATS

AUTHOR OF "THE HONOUR OF SAVELLI," "THE CHEVALIER D'AURIAC," ETC.

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PART I.

CHAPTER I.

SOWING THE WINDS.

I SUPPOSE there is no man who would care to have sunlight in all his life; but I hardly think there is one who could have sunk to the deep as I did, and yet have been coward enough to live, as I do—I, Gaspard de Vibrac.

As I write these lines in my study in lonely Vibrac, the four white stars on my shield, carved in relief above the fireplace, seem to burn red with the memory of my shame, and nothing can wipe out that stain in my 'scutcheon—nothing, nothing!

Thank God! I am the last of my house! Thank God! No young feet patter up and down the long corridors; no young voices shrill through these silent rooms. They would grow up to know me as the "Shame of Vibrac". The very villagers, my serfs, dogs, whom I could send to the *carcan* with a nod of my head, scowl as they doff their caps to me, and the children shiver and shrink behind their mother's skirts on those rare occasions when I come out of the château. I suppose they know the story—and I live!

And is this the pity of God? He has spared my life. Good men, honourable gentlemen, my friends—I had such friends once—have died like vermin. The Lake of Geneva holds all that is left of Maligny, *le beau cadet*, as we called him; the Vidame died at the galleys, chained to the scum of mankind. But he died, Maligny died, even Achon died, that merciless priest! And I live as a leper! I have come to know that death is the pity of God.

Forty years back there was life and strength, a hot heart, and no count kept of the score. Since then I have paid and paid; but the hideous total of my debt yet looms as large as ever.

As I look back into the past, it seems but as yesterday to me, that grey afternoon, the day following the St. Germains Affair, when Court and city were alike convulsed with terror at the discovery of the conspiracy that was to end in the shambles at Amboise, and I rode from the Louvre, through the buzzing streets of Paris, to my house in the Rue Coquillière.

Of course I was hilt deep in the matter, and, even as I rode, there was a list of names in my pocket that would have brought the heads of the owners thereof to the block did but the Cardinal of Lorraine or Catherine de Medicis cast an eye on the scroll. Prudence had counselled me to leave Paris, as most of the others had done; but as yet I was sure that the Flies of Guise had not settled upon me, and again, when a man is four-and-twenty and in love, prudence is cast to the four winds of heaven. And so I risked my neck for a pair of blue eyes, as many another man has done, and will do, and whilst I rode I placed my hand at my breast pocket, not to feel if the scroll of names was safe, but to assure myself that a letter and a delicate embroidered glove lay there over my heart. They were there; but even through my madness I felt a touch of shame, and my hand dropped to my side, for glove and letter had come from another man's wife—and he was my friend.

In a few yards I was at my own gates, and riding into the courtyard, dismounted and hurried within. I wanted to gaze upon the glove again, to read the letter once more, and to think—if ever man had need for reflection I had then.

In my study I found Majolais, the dumb, black dwarf, whom I had purchased as a gift for the Princess of Condé. He lay asleep, with his head, hideous as that of a gargoyle, resting upon a cushion of yellow satin. Ringing for my equerry, I gave orders for the dwarf to be sent at once to the Princess, and it took two men to remove him, for the creature seemed to have become attached to me in a strange, wild way, and fought like a mad thing, uttering strange sounds from his tongueless throat as he struggled with a wonderful strength to gain my side.

At last, however, he was taken away, and I was alone. Flinging myself into a chair by the window I took out the glove and the letter. The glove I kissed and placed on a table beside me, and the letter I read it again and again.

It was a mad, pitiful letter, and in the blurred and hasty lines were words that could only have been written by a woman who, for the moment, had lost all power of reason, and was ready to leap into the abyss from which there is no return. I will speak no more of it. I should have destroyed it then and there, but that I too had lost all control over myself, and for the sake of Marie de Marcilly was ready to deceive my friend, and beggar myself of my honour. When I thought of her and her unhappiness all thought of Jean de Marcilly was lost, although I had first seen war under him at the Escaillon and at Renty, though we had ridden side by side the day he took "The Emperor's Pistols," though he had saved my life in the trenches before Thionville—though, in short, he was a brave and noble gentleman and my friend. At that moment, however, he was to me the man who stood between me and my love. I had not reached this stage at once. I had fought and struggled with myself and lost. And now I was ready to take the downward steps to guilt, and descending is always easy.

It was in this frame of mind that I slowly folded the letter and put it back, when the door opened, and Badehorn, my equerry, a stolid German, stepped in.

"A lady to see monsieur."

"A lady!" I half stammered, rising from my chair, with the wildest thoughts running through my mind.

"Monsieur!"

"Show her in, please," I said, my voice shaking, my hands stone-cold. Badehorn bowed and retired. For an instant I stood in breathless expectation, then the door opened again, and the woman I loved stood before me.

I can see her now as in a mirror, tall and slight, with the fair hair and blue eyes that came to her from her English mother. The hood of the long, grey cloak she wore was thrown back, her cheeks were pale and the red gone out of the perfect bow of her lips.

"Madame," I began, hardly knowing what to say; but she came forward with hasty steps.

"Monsieur de Vibrac—I have come to warn you. You are amongst the suspected—you must leave Paris at once."

"Monsieur de Vibrac," I repeated a little bitterly; but she took no notice, and continued in the same quick, hurried manner.

"Go! I implore you! Go! It will be too late to-morrow. They have taken the Vidame, and my—my husband has fled."

"Marcilly gone! And left you!"

A rush of colour came to her cheeks.

"I warned him. It was the merest chance that I found out—and—and ——"

"You risked all to come and warn me?"

She made no answer, and then, with the room swimming around me, I dropped on my knee before her, and, taking her hand—it was as cold as mine—pleaded with all my soul.

"Madame! I have got your letter, and I know now all your unhappiness—and I know, too, another thing—else you had not come here to save my life. Oh, Madame!" And rising, I stood beside her, "The world is not made for sorrow ——"

"You are mad," she murmured, but her hand still lay in mine. I was mad, and she spoke the truth, and the desperate words burst from me.

"Marie, I love you. Come with me, and let us end this life of misery for you and for me. You love me ——"

"I have never said so ——"

"Does man or woman ever need to be told that, Marie? You have saved my life. Let me devote that life to you, and give you life and happiness. I will leave Paris to-night. There is a wicket-gate in the gardens of the Louvre beyond the Riding School. I have the key. Meet me there at compline, and when the sun rises to-morrow we will be safe from pursuit, and then, Marie—and then—happiness for you and for me ——"

I stopped, for her face was as marble, and with a shiver she murmured to herself.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Marie," I began; but she stayed me with a gesture, and putting her hands on my shoulders, looked straight into my eyes.

"Vibrac, you know not what you say. You are as mad as I am. Think what this will mean to you and to me! Think what the world will say!"

"I have thought, and I care not. What is the world to me, or I to the world? I am not mad. Let me save you from a life you hate. I will save you—

there is not one who shall stand between me and the woman I love."

"You love?" Her voice was so low the words might have been a whisper.

"Aye, love! And with a love you do not dream of, dear."

"It will spoil your life—I cannot—I cannot!"

"Marie, it will make my life—come!"

She said nothing, but stood still as a stone, her bosom heaving, and her eyes wet with tears. There was something in her look that told me she had yielded. I tried to draw her towards me, to kiss her, but she shrank back.

"Not now," she whispered, and my arm dropped to my side, and we stood gazing at one another, two wandering souls that had passed out into the unknown seas. At last she spoke again, her words coming slowly and with an effort.

"You will never regret, Vibrac? Will you?"

"My queen! Can you ask?" And bending low I touched her hand with my lips. She drew back once more quickly, and pulling her hood up, held the folds at her neck with her hand as she said:—

"I must go—let me go now."

"Until compline—and you will be at the wicket-gate?"

She but bent her head in reply, and turned as if to go. It was at this moment that we heard voices in the corridor outside, and then a hurried knocking at the door. Marie ran back to my side with a little gasp.

"They are come to take you—oh, Vibrac!"

But there was no tread of spurred heels, no clash of arms, only that insistent knocking, and then a voice:—

"Vibrac! Vibrac! It is I—Marcilly!"

We two but glanced at each other, a guilty, shrinking glance. Then springing forwards, I took Marie by the arm, and almost dragged her across the room to where a curtained archway separated my study from a dressing-room.

"In there! Quick!" I whispered; "open the door beyond, and go out by the private way; I will stop him here."

She fled through the passage, and letting the curtain fall I walked up to the door with a trembling heart, and drew back the bolt, to find Marcilly before me, with Badehorn standing behind him, a look of alarm in his face.

"You! In Paris!" I exclaimed.

"Not by my own will," he laughed grimly; "but, thanks to this dress, I am still safe," and then for the first time I noticed that he was clad in the black and yellow of Guise.

"Let no one interrupt us, Badehorn," I said, and with an affected cordiality—I seemed to learn without effort to play the hypocrite—I took Marcilly's arm and drew him within whilst he continued talking.

"I had this dress ready for an emergency, and actually helped to batter in my own doors. Then seeing a chance of getting away I slipped up here, where I knew I would be safe for an hour or so," and with these words he flung himself into the chair near the window, and began playing with the glove I had left on the table.

Sick at heart as I was with the fear that he would recognise the glove, I could not help, even then, noticing the extraordinary resemblance that he bore to the Prince of Condé, the secret chief of our conspiracy, a resemblance that had given Marcilly the nickname of "The Shadow of Condé". And as I stared at him he glanced up at me, running his eyes over my gay Court dress.

"You are safe as yet, I see," he said, "and have time for these things," and he flicked the glove from side to side.

"I leave Paris to-night. I am no longer safe."

"Then we will go together and join the Prince. It must be open war now. Thank God! The Cardinal is a poltroon, and has lost his head, else they would have trapped us like rabbits—but there are still some men amongst the Guisards, and they may be here any moment. Come!" And he started up, the glove still in his hand, "Let us be off!"

For an instant I knew not what to say; then recovering myself with an effort, I told him, "I will meet you at compline—at the Porte St. Victor". It was the gate opposite to that by which I meant to leave Paris.

"At compline! Between this and compline we may have lodgings in the Châtelet—what bee have you got in your head to stay here now?"

Unconsciously my eyes fell on the glove in his hand, and following my glance he jumped to a conclusion.

"I see," he said, with a bitter laugh, "this trifle! A pretty toy," and then, looking at it curiously, "'tis almost small enough to fit her hand".

Did the man suspect or know? Was he trifling with me? For the moment I thought he was, and watched him with a new-born cowardice in my heart. Even as I did so I thought I heard a movement in the room within, and glanced round with a guilty start. Surely Marie had not stayed? It could not be! And then I turned again to Marcilly. He had not observed that start and backward look. He was staring at the glove in his hand.

"The very perfume she uses," he murmured to himself, and, laying the glove gently on the table, he looked me full in the face, saying—

"I wish you all happiness, Vibrac, if it is as I think. More happiness than has fallen to me!"

"You! You are the most fortunate of men." He laughed shortly and sadly.

"Fortunate? Do you call that man fortunate who has seen his wife's love pass from him?"

"Pass from him?"

"Yes! Do you call that man happy who, loving his wife as I do, sees day by day a gulf opening between them. Bah! You must have known all this—you, and all the rest. Else why do I live in the Rue Bourgogne and my wife at the Louvre?"

"It will pass away. There must be some mistake."

"It will pass when I die—and I have sought for death for long. God knows! I would have let myself be taken to-day, but that she herself wrote to warn me—and that letter which I have here" (he placed his hand to his heart) "has given me some hope. It came to me like a ray of sunshine—she would not have written if she did not care."

I felt my forehead burn with shame. I was as yet too new at the game to play the villain without remorse. For an instant, when I thought of what this man had been to me, my old leader, my friend, I saw my infamy in all its meanness, and I was within an ace of telling him all, and asking him to slay me where I stood; and then, like lightning, there came to me the other thought—no—I would not yield her—for her I would pay any price. But I could not bear to have the man before me longer. It was unendurable, and to cover the expression on my face I stepped to the window. "It rains," I said for want of something to say, and he was by my side in a moment.

"There is nothing like rain to clear the streets and give us a chance. Let us go now."

I turned on him almost savagely.

"I have an appointment that I must keep; that I will keep if I die for it; but you, Marcilly—why stay? Outside Paris there is safety, and as you yourself have said, you have begun to hope again. There is danger here, but danger that I must face. Take my advice, and go now."

"I cannot desert you."

I blazed up in sudden wrath. Would I never be free of this accusing presence?

"Monsieur le Comte, I have not asked your aid—my business is private."

We stared at each other, surprise and anger in his glance. For an instant I almost hoped he was going to draw on me, for there was no more fiery spirit than Jean de Marcilly; but he controlled himself with a mighty effort.

"Forgive me, Gaspard!" he said, "we are too old in friendship to quarrel. *Au revoir!* I will meet you at the Porte St. Victor."

"No!" I said, "I cannot promise to be there. Ride straight from Paris—go straight to the Prince. There are blows to be struck, and your sword is needed. I—I will join you later. But leave me now. This house is no refuge, and our ways must be separate."

"I will wait in any case until compline at the Porte St. Victor," he repeated, and held out his hand.

I nerved myself to take it, and two minutes later saw him trot out of the courtyard into the street.

CHAPTER II.

THE RUE DES LAVANDIÈRES.

THE first thing I did after Marcilly's departure was to replace the glove in my pocket, then I lifted the curtain and walked into my dressing-room. I had a mad thought that Marie might still be there. But I was mistaken. The room was empty. I stepped up to the door leading to the private passage and tried to open it. It was locked from the inside and refused to yield. In her hurry, Marie must have taken the key with her, and turned it in the lock after her when she went.

Half-unconsciously I leaned against the door, and, I was sure of it, the faint sound of receding footsteps came to me from the stairway beyond. If I heard right she must have waited until the last moment, and heard every word of what had passed between her husband and myself—and—what a villain I must have seemed!

I could bear to be there no longer, but hastened back to the study and rang for Badehorn. He was faithful and discreet, and I could trust him with my life.

"Badehorn," I said, when he came, "we must leave Paris to-night."

"Monsieur!"

"Can you get three horses without any one in the house knowing it?"

"Monsieur has forgotten that there are horses of his kept ready at Maître Barou's."

"Ah! I grow foolish! Is there one fit for a lady to ride?"

"There is the grey that Madame de Marcilly rode ——"

"Enough! Be in waiting for me with the horses under the limes, near the Riding School of the Louvre, by nine to-night. I will join you there—and Badehorn—not a word to a soul—this is life or death."

"Does Monsieur mistrust me?"

I looked at the resolute face and honest eyes. There was no treachery there.

"No, Badehorn—not you."

He was sparing of speech, and said nothing; but his face brightened like that of a faithful dog caressed by its master, and I went on.

"I am going out now—on foot—let it be thought that I am returning shortly—give me my cloak."

As he helped me on with my cloak, he said, "Monsieur, Bilolt has just returned from the Louvre, and says that they are taking the King at once to Blois, and that the Cardinal has gone already."

"The Cardinal gone?"

"Monsieur—and the whole place in an uproar."

"It will give us breathing space, and more chance of escape then," I muttered. Then with a last word of caution to Badehorn, I left the room, and walked down the wide stairway I was never to see again.

Across the flagged courtyard, and into the street I went, and was soon lost in the throng of humanity that surged down towards the river face and the palace. I made no attempt at concealment. There was concealment enough in being an atom of that heaving mass, and the eyes would have been sharp indeed that could have recognised any one in the streets, where the drizzle blurred out everything an arm's length ahead, though here and there a faint splash of blue in the monotonous grey overhead showed that it was likely to clear soon. Under the dripping eaves, beneath the shelter of the overhanging windows, within and about the doors of shops and cabarets, groups of people were assembled, all talking eagerly and in an excited manner of the events of the past two days. Despite the rain the streets were crowded with ever-moving waves of passers-by, and now and then above the swish of the rain, above the continuous and insistent hum of voices, one could hear a shout of "Down with the tiger of Lorraine!"—a cry that would be replied to at once by an answering, "A Guise! A Guise! Death to the Huguenots!" Then would follow a roar of many throats that showed that the passions of the mob were rising to fever heat.

I paid no attention, however, to what was passing, but went steadily onwards towards the Rue des Lavandières. In that quiet street was an inn kept by one who was a secret agent of our party, and I judged that in his house I would be safe from observation until the hour came for me to meet Marie. I was in a frame of mind not easy to describe. I was conscious that I had played an utterly despicable part towards my friend, whilst at the same time I fully believed that I was justified in rescuing Marie—so I put it to myself—from her unhappy condition, and I had persuaded myself moreover that any means were justifiable to attain that end and give me the woman I loved. That love for her had grown to be part of my life. How it all came about I know not; but it was on my return from the campaign in the Milanese that I met her, frivolous and gay, amongst the gay and brilliant beauties of the "Queen Mother's Squadron". She had been but lately married to the Comte de Marcilly, a family arrangement, and though there was love on his side there was none on hers—as she thought—and they slowly drifted apart. It was the case of a wife, feather-brained, but good at heart, with just enough imagination to make it a peril, and of a husband who could neither come down to his wife's level nor lift her to his. And the result was unhappiness. It was at this moment that we met, and one of those friendships that will spring up between man and woman sprang up between us, and inch by inch we drifted nearer to danger without either suspecting it. Then came the revelation, and I learned what she was to me—and she—to this day I know not if she ever loved me—but for the moment she was as mad as I was, and am still when I think of her. As I walked on, however, I was sore at heart. My conscience was still awake within me though its voice was unheeded, and I went on, sullen and resolved on my course, one whom it would have been dangerous to cross at the moment. I went straight onwards until I came to the river face, and then turning sharply to the left followed the Vallée de Misère until I reached the mouth of the Rue des Lavandières.

The street was almost deserted, and as I slowly picked my way along the narrow pavement towards the Bouton d'Or, as my inn was called, I noticed that the rain had ceased and that the sky was opening above, showing the eternal blue beyond and casting a mellow light on the winding street, and on the grey and mottled façades of the old houses that towered on either hand.

The Bouton d'Or was situated about the middle of the street, a little beyond the hôtel of the Sieur de Richelieu. As I came up to it I heard the sounds of a gay chorus from within, and hesitated a moment, doubtful if, under the circumstances, I should venture in. It was whilst I stood thus that I was startled by a voice.

"Alms! Alms! He who giveth unto the poor lendeth unto the Lord!"

I turned, and saw the lean figure of a Capuchin at my elbow. His hood, drawn up, almost concealed his features; but I caught a glimpse of a face, strangely pale, and of two fiery eyes that flashed out from beneath the shadow of his cowl. Though I was of the New Faith, I gave him some silver, and as he mumbled a benediction the chorus burst out again from within.

"They are gay," I muttered to myself; but, low as my tone was, the words caught the ears of the friar.

"There is a time to be gay, and a time to be grave, my son—and 'tis better to drink than to conspire."

And with these words he abruptly turned from me, and crossing the narrow road, began to descend the street, beating with his stick on the pavement, like a blind man feeling his way.

There was something so ominous in the tone of the man's voice, so curious in his manner, that for a moment I had more than a mind to follow him and make him show his face and explain his words. But as I made a step forwards, he accosted another passer-by with his strange call for alms, staying him by placing upon his shoulder a hand so thin and white that it seemed almost transparent.

"Bah!" I said to myself, as the new victim fumbled in his pocket, with an ill grace, to pay his dole. "'Tis a mad friar, after all!" And without more ado I entered the inn, to come face to face with the last man I desired to meet at the time. It was the young Baron de St. Cyergue, the son of Bohier, the late Receiver-General of Normandy, and though good-hearted, he was a scandal-monger and a gossip, though amusing enough in his way, being much given to vaunting his exploits with the dice-box, in arms and in love. He prided himself on being a *viveur*, and had almost dissipated a fine inheritance. It was this cackler that I met, standing in the hall, with a bottle of wine in each hand, and a face red and flushed.

"Vibrac!" he exclaimed, "Welcome! welcome! I saw you at the Louvre this morning, and meant to ask you to join our party here, but you were engaged, and I could not get a chance to put in a word," and he leered at me cunningly.

Cursing my ill-fortune at having fallen into the hands of this bore, I was about to make my excuses and suit at the same time; but he put a bottle on the floor and seized me by the lapel of my cloak.

"Now you are not going to say you have another engagement! You must come and join us. There is Lignières, the brightest wit in Paris, and some one you will be glad to see, no less than your old friend Ponthieu of the Trans-Alpine Infantry, who served with you in Milan and the Sicilies; he is my mother's cousin, and but arrived in Paris this morning."

I would have shaken him off but for the mention of Ponthieu's name. He was a Gascon of good family, an old friend of mine, and one of the most trusted agents of our party—a man whose reckless daring often succeeded where skilful plans failed, and it would, perhaps, be well to meet him. I hesitated and was lost, for St. Cyergue shouted out:—

"Ponthieu! Lignières! The gods have sent Vibrac to us; come and persuade him to stay!"

In a moment the door of an adjoining room opened, and half a dozen men crowded around me, and I found myself shaking hands with Ponthieu, who asked twenty questions in a breath, and five minutes later we were seated round a table pledging our host's health. To tell the truth, now that I had joined the party, I felt the better for it. It took me out of myself, and it was a pleasure to meet Ponthieu. We were able to exchange a word or so, and the Gascon told me he was leaving Paris that very night.

"If you are caught it will be Montfaucon!" I said and Ponthieu smiled.

"*Mon ami!* I am leaving Paris in the train of Catherine herself."

I looked at him hardly, and was about to express my surprise and add another warning when St. Cyergue cut in, the wine passed, and the conversation became general.

Now, in the strangeness of things, what followed was to affect the whole of my future, and it is necessary that I should go into some detail. The room in which we sat opened out into a small courtyard surrounded by a high wall. A side door gave access to the street, and near it grew a stunted apple tree that somehow lived and thrived amidst its sterile surroundings. Beneath the apple tree was a rustic seat and a table, and as we drank and talked I observed the side door open, and the Capuchin entered and called for alms. The innkeeper went out not best pleased to attend to him, but it was dangerous to cross a priest then. He motioned the friar to a seat on the bench and served him—as sparingly as possible. As I looked the vague mistrust I had of that strange figure when we first met came upon me once more, and I said as I pointed to him:—

"See there! He might be a spy for all we know."

"He is welcome to spy here," said St. Cyergue, "we but conspire against red wine."

"Let us call the friar and make him drink our health," said some one.

"Bah!" exclaimed Lignières, who had hitherto kept silent, contenting himself with filling his glass each time the bottle passed him. "Waste wine on a friar? Not I! 'Twould be better to drink to the bright eyes of our mistresses. Would it not, Vibrac?" I shrugged my shoulders and laughed; but the man being a little in his cups went at me with the persistence of a fly.

"Yes! we will toast our mistresses, and the last comer shall have the place of honour, and toast her first. Go on, Vibrac, name her—fill your glasses gentlemen!"

"We will toast her without naming her," said Ponthieu, and the others laughed in approval as St. Cyergue cut in.

"By far the best plan. I, for one, would find it difficult to name my particular star."

"You change her every day with your hat and cloak, eh baron?" sneered Lignières, who was beginning to be quarrelsome; "you are not like our Stephen here, constant only to his Chloe."

"Monsieur le Vicomte, you go too far." I warned him, but he laughed recklessly.

"If you do not name her I will, and put you to shame as a chicken-livered lover," and he rose to his feet with his glass held out at arm's length before him. St. Cyergue tried to stop him, but it was useless. "Gentlemen!" he said, "here's to Chloe of the blue eyes and fair hair. Here's to sweet Ma——!" He spoke no more, for I had risen in uncontrollable anger and flung the glass I held in my hand in his face, and he stood, sober enough now, wiping his bleeding lips with the back of his hand and looking at me with death in his eyes. Then, with a little gasp, for he was almost speechless with rage, he pointed to the courtyard.

"Now," he said, and with a bow I replied, "I am at your service, monsieur."

Not a word more was said, and we passed out silently into the courtyard. The landlord, seeing what was about to happen, would have raised an outcry, but Ponthieu sternly bade him be silent, and he slunk shivering against the lee of the wall. I took off my coat and vest, and as I flung them on the rustic bench noticed that the friar was still there—he was standing calmly staring at us.

"*Mon père!*" said St. Cyergue, "you had better go."

And the reply came in deep stern tones.

"There may be work for a priest when this is done."

"Let him stay. If he goes he may call the watch," said one of those present, and St. Cyergue turned on his heel with a shrug of his shoulders.

Lignières had followed my example, and stripped to his shirt, then came the few brief preliminaries, and Ponthieu's sharp

"*Allez, messieurs!*"

For a little we tried to feel each other's strength, and it was nothing but pretty sword-play. But it soon came to deadly earnest, for I was in a white heat with rage, and almost beside myself with the events of the day; whilst Lignières—well—he meant to kill me as he had killed others before.

But it was his hour; and it was all over in five minutes. He thrust too low in quarte, I parried, and with the riposte ran him through, and with a gasp, he flung his sword into the air, and fell backwards, rolling limply on his side as he touched the flagstones.

I stood over him, my red sword quivering in my hand, and the others crowded round, grave and pale.

Ponthieu was kneeling by the fallen man, his hand to his heart, a troubled look on his face. And now the tall figure of the Capuchin stole silently up, and bending down he said to Ponthieu, "I said there would be work for me".

Then passing his arm round Lignières' neck, he raised his head, and held a crucifix before those glazing eyes, which opened once, to close again for ever. There was a sign, a quiver of the limbs, and a strong man was dead—slain for a light word and a foolish jest.

It was then that Ponthieu caught me by the arm.

"Go!" he said, "we will see to the rest."

"You bear witness, gentlemen, that he forced it on me—that it was in fair fight," I said hoarsely, and there was a murmur of assent.

"Go!" repeated Ponthieu, and I walked to the bench for my hat and coat. As I stooped to get them, I found the Capuchin by my side. He helped me with my things, and as he did so, whispered low:—

"There is no need to fear: Monsieur did the Queen-Mother and the State a great service when he took off his coat for this little affair," and he half turned towards the group gathered in the centre of the courtyard. I barely caught the words, though they came back to me with their full force very shortly. At the time, however, all that I wanted was to put a distance between myself and the still figure lying there, that but a moment before had been so full of life and strength. I made no answer to the friar, spoke no word of farewell to the others; but fastening the clasp of my cloak, and pulling my hat over my brows, went out, redhanded, into the street.

PART II.

CHAPTER III.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

I WALKED rapidly towards the Vallée de Misère, looking neither to the right nor to the left of me. What had happened had not been my fault. The quarrel was none of my seeking, and Lignières would have surely killed me if the luck had been with him. And yet I shuddered at it all. Though I had taken life before, it was in the heat of battle, and the thing had left no impression upon me. But work of this kind was new to me, and, despite my four campaigns and a soldier's life, it was the first time that a man had died thus at my hands. I felt it as a presage of ill-fortune to come, and full of useless regrets and gloomy forebodings, I moodily paced the foreshore of the river watching the sunset fade from gold to purple, and from purple to grey, that lightened again as the moon rose and hung heavily in the sky, throwing her soft beams on the shadowy, irregular lines of the city and gleaming in scales of silver on the lapping waters of the Seine.

It was whilst I stood thus for a moment that I once more heard the voice of the Capuchin uttering his dismal cry.

"Alms! Alms! He who giveth unto the poor lendeth unto the Lord."

He seemed to be coming my way, and the voice sounded quite close. I glanced back, but could see nothing for the quaking mist that rose slowly from the moist banks. Near me was a small boat, and, without more ado, I stepped in and told the boatman to row me down the river. I did this on the impulse of the moment, for I felt it was impossible for me to meet the friar again.

I was soon out in mid-stream, far from his presence and out of earshot of his doleful cry, and the boatman, resting on his oars, allowed the skiff to drift slowly down the current. Finally we floated opposite the façade of the Louvre. It was ablaze with light, and, from where I was, I could distinctly see dark shadows flitting hastily to and fro across the windows, and then the trumpets of the archers sounded the assemble, the brazen notes coming harshly to us across the night.

Leaning forwards on his oars as we rocked on the waters, the boatman asked:—

"The King goes to-night, does he not, monsieur?"

"So 'tis said," I answered shortly, and then, "Take me back to the quay".

The man shrugged his shoulders, and did as he was bidden. It was none of his business where his fares wanted to be taken, as long as they paid him; and, as we touched the bank, I dropped a gold Henri into his palm, and sprang ashore, leaving him alternately looking at the coin and staring after me in blank amazement as I hurried along the quay. I had, however, effected my object and avoided the Capuchin, and, in my present frame of mind, that was worth even more than the gold piece I placed in the boatman's hands.

It now wanted but a half-hour to compline, and with a beating heart I hurried on to keep my tryst. The shortest way was by the old Church of St. Thomas, and turning sharply to my right, I followed the narrow street until I had passed the Magasins. A little beyond was the Riding School, and beyond that again the grove of lime trees, in which I had told Badehorn to keep the horses. I hastened thither, and found him there.

He had left my house soon after I had, and could give me no news of what had happened since. But I afterwards learned that shortly after I had gone, M. de Bresy with some of the archer-guard had arrived to effect my arrest, and failing in that, had destroyed almost everything they could lay their hands on. It was the fortune of war; but on a subsequent occasion I had my turn with de Bresy, as will be seen hereafter. Having seen that the horses were safe, I retraced my steps until I came to the wicket-gate. Opening it with my key, I stepped in, and found myself in the outer gardens of the Louvre. A long avenue of trees stretched before me, the grass-grown ride between them in chequered light and shade. To the left rose the walls of the Riding School, and beyond was the grey line of the inner wall of the Louvre, and the terraces of the private gardens of the palace; but there was no soul to be seen.

"Marie! Marie!" I called out in a low but clear voice.

There was no answer. Overhead the leaves shivered, and from without the hum of the city came to me, rising and falling with the wind like the murmur of distant waves on a lone seashore.

Was she going to fail me? Had anything happened to prevent her coming? I felt my heart grow cold at the thought, and peering into the moonlit night listened and listened full of anxious fears; but I heard no sound of advancing footsteps, saw nothing but the ivy-grown walls of the Riding School, the waving trees, and the phantom outlines of the Louvre looming vast and gigantic in the night.

All at once from the Queen's Terrace I heard the challenge of a sentry, and as it died away the bells of the Augustins began to sound the compline, and abbey and church took up the peal till all Paris rang with the musical chime of bells.

"She cannot be long now," I muttered, to assure myself, and then my straining eyes saw a grey figure flit across a band of light in the avenue, and still keeping under cover of the trees I hastened towards it. Nearer and nearer came the figure. It was Marie, and stepping out from the shadow I called out:—

"Marie! It is I—Vibrac."

She stopped, hesitated, then came forward slowly, and taking her hand in mine I drew her towards me. For one brief moment she remained thus, her head resting upon my shoulder, and strong man as I was I stood there shivering at her touch like the leaves of the trees above me.

"At last!" I murmured, "at last!" But my voice seemed to bring her to herself. With a little gasp she freed herself from me, and when I would have restrained her she exclaimed:—

"Let me go! I cannot talk like this. I want to tell you something."

"Marie! There is but little time."

"But time for what I have to say. Oh, Vibrac! Have you thought of what this will all lead to?"

"To happiness for us."

"Happiness! Do you think there can be happiness when there will be nothing but useless regrets for the past that can never be undone. With time you will realise all this. You will hate and despise me."

"Marie!"

"Yes, hate and despise me for what I am. And I—even now I hate—I despise myself."

"Marie! What new madness is this? Surely you do not doubt me? I love you and you only. Far away from France what shall we care of babblers who talk? What is the world to us who are all in all to each other?" And in my eagerness I placed my hand on her arm.

"Yes, all in all in sin, and we cannot go away from ourselves. Don't touch me now. I must say what I came to tell you. Monsieur, I will save you from yourself—I must save myself too!" And then with pitiful entreaty in her voice, "Oh, Vibrac! Give me strength. Help me a little!"

"I—I do not understand," I stammered, though I knew well what she meant.

"You do not understand. You must. Oh, Vibrac! Do you not see that in a moment of wicked folly we resolved to take a step from which there can be no withdrawal. Oh! I do not blame you. It was my fault to have listened to you, to have led you on unwittingly—and you are but a boy still! But I want you to be a brave man. Banish me from your thoughts! I am not what you think—but, God knows, I am not a bad woman—and there is time yet to draw back—to save myself and you."

"You would desert me?" I asked bitterly, a dull despair in my heart.

"No!" she answered, the low, rich tones of her voice vibrating through the night. "I would stand by you and recall you to your strength. God would desert us if we did this thing."

"We should have thought of that before—it is too late now?"

"No—it is not too late—you must do as I tell you."

But I was not going to let her slip through my hands. I had paid for her with my honour. For her sake my hands were red, and Lignières lay stark and dead. I had earned my reward and would have it, and, mad at the thought of losing her, I gripped her by the arm, and—the shame of it—I told her I would slay her and myself, rather than lose her.

She made no answer, but remained calmly looking at me as I stood in front of her, the hot blood throbbing in my head, my breath coming thick and fast. There, as we faced each other the moon passed the shadow of the trees and threw its light on her, keeping me still in darkness. She was pale as the dead, but she neither flinched nor showed the slightest sign of fear, and we remained thus for a minute—a minute that might have been an hour, so slowly did it pass. At last she spoke.

"Do you think I fear death? Not now, Vibrac! Not now! If it came it would be a just punishment—an expiation," but even as she spoke I felt the sting of shame at my unmanly words, words uttered in the madness of one who was beside himself, and I loosed my hand from her arm.

"God forgive me!" I cried, "I did not mean that."

"God has much to forgive us both, Vibrac. Oh, monsieur, we are both on the threshold of a great sin, and I am a weak woman and you a man. Give me strength! Help me to do what is right!"

Help her! It was I who needed help, not Marie.

"You never loved me!" I exclaimed in my bitterness.

"I cannot love you in the way you want," and then coming closer to me she placed her hand on my shoulder with a tender, almost caressing touch, and looked into my eyes. "Listen, monsieur!" she said. "If it will help you to be yourself I will tell you of myself. I never knew my own heart until I left you to-day—and I left you after hearing every word that passed between you and my husband. I thought his love was gone from me, and it was a desperate, foolish woman who promised you what she did. I know now that Marcilly loves me still, and, with God's help, I mean to be a better woman and deserve his love. On the brink of the precipice I have saved myself and saved you, and, monsieur, my weakness has passed now, and I will do what is right."

She paused as if waiting for an answer, but I could say nothing. In my heart I knew she was right. Yet it was as if all the brightness had gone out of my life, and I stood there numbed and speechless.

"Say something, Vibrac!" she exclaimed. "Tell me you have forgiven an erring woman, who has caused you all this pain. Say you will try and do what I ask, and forget me!"

I turned from her, and walked slowly across the ride, my head held down, my hands clenched in an agony. All that was good in me rose and clamoured for her pleading. The strength that had come to her seemed to bring strength to me, and when I faced her again I was victor over myself.

"Let it be as you wish," I said hoarsely. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" And our hands met. And then, womanlike, she spoke again.

"Monsieur! You must never see me again. But I will hear of you, and let me hear you are still what I have always heard and known you to be—a brave and noble gentleman."

Bowing low I touched her hand with my lips, and then releasing it, stepped aside and lifted my hat.

"Good-bye!" she said again softly, and turning, passed swiftly and silently, like a ghost, up the long avenue. Once she stopped, where the moonlight shone brightly, and looked back, and then she was gone.

Near me lay the mouldering trunk of a fallen tree. I sat down there and stared stupidly before me. Something of the resolve, something of the unspoken promise I had made to her, came to me to give me strength. Yes, I would forget her. I would carry with me into my new life no memory of her. I slipped my hand in my breast pocket for the letters and the glove—to destroy them. They were gone, and with them the scroll of names. In my horror at the loss I sprang to my feet, and searched around me; but with no avail; and then, the parting words of the Capuchin came to me, and for the first time I grasped their full meaning. I had indeed done the Queen-Mother and the tyrants of Guise a service, when I left my coat by the side of the spy—for a spy he must have been—and he had the letters, and the scroll with the list of names.

Cursing my folly a hundred times as I reflected how useless it would be to try and find the man now, I hurried back to Badehorn, and half an hour later had left Paris for ever.

And so came the parting of the ways. Full of resolve to conquer the past, I flung myself heart and soul into the great enterprise that ended in disaster at Amboise. By strange fortune I served again with Marcilly, and strove to efface by my loyalty and zeal the memory of the wrong I would have done him.

Then I heard that husband and wife were reconciled, though she still remained at Orleans with the Court, and the thought that she had hopelessly passed out of my life maddened and tortured me beyond endurance. I began slowly to fall back into my former state. I began to absolutely hate Marcilly as the man who had taken away from me my only chance of happiness, and after that I was ready to yield to temptation.

Things went against us, as all the world knows. Then came the news of the arrest and imprisonment of the Prince of Condé. It came to us at Châtillon, whither the Princess of Condé had sought refuge with a few devoted adherents, amongst whom was Jean de Marcilly; and there, too, befel that which led me, step by step, along the Traitor's Way.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT MAJOLAIS SAW.

It was Majolais, the black dwarf, who first pointed it out. We, that is, Lanoy, the Comte de Marcilly, who was known as "The Shadow of Condé," myself, and lastly Majolais, who had no business to be there, were on the platform of the stone cavalier built up against the keep of Châtillon, where the walls fell sheer into the Indre.

A little to our right was a projecting oriel window, in the bay of which sat the Princess, Condé's wife, with avid eyes that looked ever to the north. It was partly to escape those eyes, which implored and upbraided at once whenever they fell on us, that we had come out, and were pacing backwards and forwards, trying to talk, with hearts as heavy as lead. But we had to flog ourselves for this, the effort to speak was so painful, and at last there was a dead silence, and we tramped up and down, in a sullen and speechless way.

Finally Lanoy and the Comte, separating from me, leaned over the battlements, and looked down into the town below, at the pointed gables, the red and grey roofs, and the narrow, winding streets, where the people were as ants moving restlessly to and fro.

And I, I was left to my thoughts, such thoughts as a man has who has sinned and regretted, and then sinned again. They sting like an adder now when I recall them, and they hurt even then; but I shook them from me as a dog shakes the water from his coat, and, standing still, looked aimlessly around.

It was winter, but the sun was out, and the air crisp. I glanced up at the spread of the sky, half-filled with a mountainous pile of soft, white clouds glistening in the light, and wondered to myself that the sun could shine on such a hell as lay beneath it. The sky was as blue, the clouds as silver-white in the north as in the south, the east, the west. And yet the heavens should have been black there, above Amboise and the Orléanais, black as a pall, and lit only by the pitying eyes of the stars, for there the Italian woman and the Lorrainers were shedding the best blood of France like water.

Let me stop for a moment to explain in a few words why we were as we were. The King—he was barely sixteen, and already dying of a terrible disease—together with Mary of Scotland, his young Queen, were in the hands of the brothers of Guise and Catherine, and Lorrainer and Italian were both, for the present, partners. The country was bankrupt. In the King's name they reduced it to beggary. The people were starving. They let them die. They seemed to have gone blood mad in their thirst for power. It was nothing but "Kill! kill!" Add to this a religious persecution of the most intolerable kind, and the picture of the times is roughly outlined.

The most fiendish cruelties were inflicted in the name of the Law, and of God, against the followers of the New Faith, or rather of the Old Faith that was found anew. "Huguenots!" they called us in derision, after the wretched farthing piece, or, as some say, after the goblin King of Tours—I neither know nor care which—the name was yet to be one of terror to the Woman of Babylon.

The chiefs of the old nobility, and Princes of the blood, found themselves prisoners, or practically exiles. Their hereditary rights were denied to them, they were cut off from the State. It is not strange that all the liberalism, all the patriotism in France saw with horror the coming ruin of their country, and forgetting, for the moment, differences of creed, coalesced with one accord against the tyrants. The outcome of this was the attempt of Amboise—and its results are known.

The Right had lost, by the will of God, and now the conquerors were slaking their vengeance in blood, and in the name of the child King condemning their victims to hideous tortures and to awful deaths. In the history of my country there is but one crime darker than this, one page more stained with sin. But the day was yet far distant when the bells of St. Germain l'Auxerrois were to clang out the signal for the Feast of St. Bartholomew, and we, who stood gasping with horror, thought that the worst had befallen France.

The one hope of all Frenchmen who loved their country, Louis of Condé, was in the hands of the Guisards. His life hung by a hair, and on that life hung, as we thought then, the safety of France. We were powerless to help, and here at Châtillon we, who had escaped disaster as yet, were practically prisoners, for De Termes held us in check from Ligueil, and the lances of Montluc gleamed from every tower from Buzançais to St. Aignan. We were, in short, caged. We could run about in our cage but not beyond its bars. We were in a trap—like rats in a trap.

The Princess of Condé, Eleanore de Roye, had sunk into a speechless grief that was terrible to witness. Every day brought danger nearer and nearer, and yet she refused to move, refused to make any attempt at escape; we might have twice made a dash for Poitou, where the Admiral and the Rhinegrave were still in some force. She, however, declined point-blank, and sat like a Penelope, weaving endless plans to free her husband, each one more hopeless than the other.

I stood, as I have said, on the cavalier, looking aimlessly at the sky, and then made a half movement to join my friends, when I was arrested by a cry, such a cry as might come from the throat of a tongueless man, and, turning round, saw Majolais on the carriage of a brass carronade, pointing eagerly at something. The wind had caught his short, red cloak, blowing it out like a banner, and the hooded falcon he held in leash was screaming and fluttering overhead, the full length of his tether. There the creature stood, distorted and misshapen, uttering his strange cries, now looking at me, then turning his yellow eyes down the St. Aignan road, and swinging his arms wildly.

I hastened towards him, Lanoy and Marcilly after me, and we three tried to follow the Moor's glance, but could make out nothing, although Majolais, in his eagerness to show us what he saw, now plucked at our sleeves, now leaned half out of the embrasure, his arm stretched out towards the plain beneath him, the falcon screaming overhead, and he gibbering the whole time like the wild thing he was.

At last I saw it — I, the youngest of the three. Running my eyes along the white, glistening road I made out a small speck. Seizing the dwarf's hand I held it out in that direction, and, nodding assent, he fairly danced with joy.

"There!" I cried, "that little speck beyond the wood there! 'Tis that the imp means."

Then they saw too, and shading his eyes with his hands Lanoy looked hard and earnestly.

"Some one rides there for his life," he said. "I would we had the tube Cortoni made for the King. We would see him then as close as my hand."

"Perhaps he comes from Orleans. He may be for us," I hazarded.

They did not answer, but we craned our necks and strained our eyes, whilst the spot flew faster and faster, and grew bigger and bigger, until at last we all saw clearly that it was a man on horseback, and that he was heading straight for Châtillon, for he passed the cross-road to Tours.

The Princess and her ladies, observing the dwarf's gestures and our movements, came out to join us, and we all watched in an excited but silent group. It was not a wonderful thing, this sight of a man riding at full speed; but somehow we all felt, though we did not say so, that he was riding for us.

She, the Princess of Condé, stood with her hands on the brass gun, leaning slightly forwards, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes straining. It was as if she was striving to read on the rider's face the message he bore.

On a sudden Mademoiselle de Mailly, who was next to her, called out:—

"See! He wears a white scarf! Look, madame! Look!"

True enough. Across his left shoulder, and streaming a yard behind him, was a white scarf, the emblem of our party.

"He is for us," the girl called out shrilly; "he must be from Orleans, madame. Ah, madame!" and she turned half round with clasped hands, but the Princess made no answer, staring straight at the coming man with hot eyes, eyes that burned with eagerness, eyes that blazed with a hundred questions at once.

"The fool!" muttered Lanoy. "The idiot! to wear that scarf now! If any of Montluc's troopers are skulking in that wood he is lost."

Jean de Marcilly touched me softly on the shoulder, and our glances met. I knew what he meant, and answered with the positive assurance of youth.

"It is needless. He is perfectly safe, and we will have only our labour for our pains. I rode through the wood but two hours ago. There was no one there, and Coqueville tells me Montluc's bees are hiving elsewhere to-day."

"That is my latest news. It would almost seem that we have yet another chance to go if we wanted," said a quiet voice, and the Captain of Châtillon joined us.

It was as if Lanoy was about to speak, when Marcilly cut in impatiently:—

"Bees or no bees, I go!" And he looked at me again. I made a step forwards, and then, in a flash, there came a strange and wicked whisper to my soul—

"Let him go. He may die—may get killed, and you and she will be free."

It was almost as if a living voice hissed this into my ear, and I clung to the thought. I would not meet Marcilly's eyes, though I watched him beneath my glance, and with a laugh and a lifting of his brows he was gone.

"Take Badehorn and Schöner, the German reiter, with you," called Coqueville after him, and we heard him halloo back as he sped down the winding stair. I was glad of this. It removed attention from me. Although I was aware that no one had noticed us, I felt as if all eyes were on me when Marcilly spoke. I found myself near Majolais, and the dwarf winked at me as if he knew. I turned with a muttered curse, and sought refuge next to Yvonne de Mailly. I do not know how it was, but in her eagerness perhaps to see, she leaned forward, and her hand rested lightly on my arm. I caught the dwarf's glance again, and he laughed to himself. I could have flung him from the battlements.

In a moment more we saw Marcilly crossing the bridge. Neither Badehorn nor Schöner were with him. He was alone, and I waited and watched.

Now the wood mentioned above was a part of the forest of Châtillon that stretched eastward, extending an arm, as it were, to the St. Aignan road, a bit of which it hid from our view. As Marcilly crossed the bridge the stranger passed behind the trees, and then we heard the distant crack of an arquebus, and a suppressed cry burst from the Princess.

PART III.

CHAPTER V.

"POUR MA FOY, ET MON ROY."

"HE is lost! *Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed. "Ah! Monsieur de Vibrac!" And she just looked at me; but such a look.

There was a clattering of spurred heels as Coqueville and Lanoy rushed to the stairway; but, trembling and hot with shame, I remained chained by the horrible thought that had taken possession of me. I knew what the Princess meant. I had said that the wood was safe, and yet I had not searched there in that long, narrow neck of forest before us, and our man was lost. Yet no! He was out again; but this time not alone, for three men were at his heels, three men with fresh horses. One came alongside. Our man leaned out sideways with extended arm—a glint of steel—and it was a riderless horse that galloped by his side, with long, loose, trailing reins; and then it fell, and, scrambling up, stood stupidly by the side of the road.

Yvonne de Mailly's white fingers tightened over my arm, and I saw her pale a little as she gave a quick gasp. The dwarf almost screamed, and I thought I heard the echo of a prayer from the Princess. I watched with dry, parched lips, and hell in my heart.

It was still two to one, and these were heavy odds; but Marcilly was not far, and going like the wind. The two pursuers hung closely behind the fugitive—there was a long, dark thing in the snow, athwart the road, where the third lay, still and motionless. But the two, intent and eager, took no note of Jean, saw nothing of Lanoy and Coqueville and the half-dozen others who spurred behind them. Our man did, however; he bent forwards in his saddle, and his good horse seemed to fly.

We watched in a breathless silence. And then—it had come and gone in a moment. The fugitive was safe. He had passed Marcilly and was close to the others. But Jean—my breath came thick and fast. Was it to be, after all? The leading horse against Marcilly swerved to one side. Its rider, seeing the succour at hand, turned off to his left and made for the wood; and Lanoy—there was no mistaking the bay horse, and tall, thin figure—cut across country to intercept him. I saw no more of that. All my eyes were for Marcilly and his adversary.

There was no better sword than Jean in France. I could have sworn that, until now. But what was this? There was a circle of light as they came together, something flashed downwards, and Marcilly was disarmed. And then—it was all in a hand turn, remember—a strange thing happened. Marcilly's adversary raised his sword to the salute and, leaving him harmless, rode straight on towards Coqueville and his men. He broke right through them, and, pulling across the road, galloped off at a break-neck pace towards Tours. There was no attempt to follow. They all gathered in a group round some one who had fallen. Once the man faced half round, and shook his clenched fist behind him, and then there was the light of his red plume, and we lost him to view in the thickets and low forests that fringed the river—and he escaped.

But our man was safe, no thanks to me. He reined up at the bridge, crossing it slowly, and then we saw him rock in his saddle.

"He is hurt!" exclaimed the Princess: but I heard no more. I was down the long stairway three steps at a time, and, hurrying across the flagged court, was just able to meet the stranger, for as I reached the castle gates he entered, his horse stopping under the stone archway of its own accord, with head held down and heaving flanks, whilst the rider hung low over the saddle. Seeing me approach, however, he steadied himself with an effort, answering my "well ridden and bravely done, monsieur," with a white smile and a hoarse, "'twas between the skin and the flesh". As he spoke I thought he would have fallen, and rushed to his side.

"Back!" I shouted to those who crowded round. "Back! Give room!" and, helping him to dismount, and lending him my arm, for he was very faint, and kept up only by his courage, we crossed the yard slowly, and began to ascend the stone steps of the main entrance, where I already saw the Princess with a group round her. As we reached the steps, she called out in sudden recognition:—

"It is Maligny! Maligny!" And she ran down to us. "Speak, man! Speak! My husband—Condé—what of him?"

He bit his dry lips and looked around, then answered thickly:—

"The King has agreed to his death; but there is still hope. I bring his message to you. It is: *Take the young child and flee into Egypt*. And, madame—go now—for it will be too late to-morrow." He said the last words quickly, as if he felt he would not have time to finish his speech, and then fell sideways into my arms like a dead man.

And now I saw what a good woman can do. Save for a rapid gesture of despair as Maligny gave his abrupt message, she made no sign, but bent over the fainting man, giving some orders about him as calmly as if he, and he alone, were the one object that filled her mind. We carried him to the nearest room—mine—and Chandieu, the Prince's chaplain, a man skilled in wounds, was soon by his side. To our intense relief, he pronounced Maligny merely faint from fatigue, saying that the wound on his arm was nothing, and that he would be as well as ever in a few hours. Then he took charge of him, driving us all from the room, as he would be alone with his patient.

We gathered in a group on the rush-covered daïs of the great hall. We were all there except Marcilly, whom I saw nowhere. Lanoy had accounted for his man, and Coqueville was limping and bruised. It was he who had been ridden down, and it was thought killed, by the one who had escaped, but he had come to no hurt.

We were discussing Maligny's tidings and Condé's message, and Coqueville was earnest in his entreaty for the Princess to leave Châtillon at once.

"Madame," he said, "it is not for ourselves I speak. There is monseigneur here to think of, the heir of the *Sires des fleurs de lys*." As he spoke he placed his sunburnt hand lightly on the shoulder of the slender, fair-haired boy, her son, who stood by her side. He was not alone in pressing the matter, and it was for an hour or more, perhaps, that we discussed it, until we reached the last corner in madame's patience, for she spoke firmly and crisply.

"Messieurs! Very well! I shall leave Châtillon now; but for Orleans. My place is there. I have neglected my duty too long."

She was facing us, a small, slight woman she was, but for the moment she seemed to have grown absolutely tall. "As for Henri here," she went on, stooping and giving the boy a fierce little kiss, "he must live for vengeance if need be."

What more she would have said I know not, but now Maligny appeared, his arm bandaged, and leaning for support on Jean. Behind came Chandieu, a tall, dark figure. As they approached it was impossible not to be struck by Marcilly's resemblance to Condé. In a crowd a hundred men would have sworn he was the Prince. He had the same slight, spare figure, the same red-brown hair, the same eyes, even his voice, his very gestures were the same.

In the moment of excitement I had forgotten about myself, else I had not dared to face Marcilly with the consciousness of my recent shameful action upon me. It is one crowning mercy that there are moments when even the most sinful forget—even I do sometimes—for a very little.

"Madame," said Maligny, "I have come to finish what I fear I began too bluntly. It is true that the sentence has been passed, but the Chancellor has refused to affix the Great Seal, and no day has been appointed for ——" and he hesitated a moment, and then went on, not finishing his sentence, though we all understood: "The King is very ill, and at any time may relent. Strange as it may seem, the Italian is veering round in our favour. The Guise grow too great, and she realises now what that greatness will mean for her. The Admiral knows her mind, and 'tis said that the Constable will now move from Yvoy le Marron. There is a plan even now to save the Prince;" he looked at Marcilly, and then went on: "but, in the meantime, it is of the first importance that you and the young Prince should be safe from harm. Monseigneur kisses your hands, and begs you to leave Châtillon for St. Bauld, where d'Andelot lies with fifty horse to escort you to the Admiral and safety. There is one, too, who aids us in secret—I dare not give the name—and I tell you that no sword will be drawn to stay us if we leave within the next few hours. Who those wasps were who attacked me in the wood I know not. They are done with, however, for the present. The danger now is in staying—none in going—but we must go now."

The Princess hardly seemed to hear the latter portion of Maligny's speech. "And so the King—that boy—has signed the warrant!" she said. "But Lorraine held the pen. But they dare not! They dare not! After Navarre he is the first Prince of the blood? And is that all you have to say? Oh! Take me to him!" And she looked imploringly at us.

"Madame," began Maligny, but she broke in upon his speech.

"Wait! Let me think! I know you have nothing more to say except to urge me to desert my husband. I know you are going to repeat that. Your plans and politics will break my woman's heart. Ah! I know he will die. Have ever the merciless shown mercy? He will die, I say; but I die with him. Now hear me, Monsieur le Vicomte—and all of you. I go to Orleans—Orleans—do you hear? And I leave in an hour's time."

She finished; her hands clenched, her cheeks white; but in the grey deep of her eyes such a mixture of rage, sorrow, irresolution, and despair as I hope never to see in a human glance again. The strain had been too much, and, highly as she spoke, I knew and felt that she would yet yield. It was the old story. It is not in a woman's words, but in her eyes, that her heart lies.

As she stood there, silent and motionless, Marcilly leaned over the Vicomte's shoulder, and whispered something. Then they both beckoned to Lanoy and Chandieu, and retired into the recess of the window, where they spoke in whispers, and, as I looked, I saw a smile on Lanoy's dark face, a light in the Vicomte's eyes—and a jealous anger came into my heart that I was not asked to share their confidences.

But here on the daïs, where through the open window the mellow sunlight fell on the rushes at our feet, and lit them up in gold and brown; where still we were partly in shadow and partly in light, there was no word spoken, and the Princess stood, biting her lip and watching the four. So still was it one might have heard the fall of a silken glove.

Suddenly the falcon on Majolais wrist began to flutter its wings, and the sound, as it broke the stillness, brought the Princess to the moment. She turned to Coqueville and myself.

"Messieurs! You will excuse me—time presses." With a slight bow to us, and a shrug of her shoulders in the direction of the four, she walked slowly down the hall, Yvonne de Mailly turning as she followed her, and throwing up the palms of her hands as if to say it was all over.

As the Princess passed the window, however, Lanoy and the Vicomte came up to her and spoke in low, rapid tones, Jean standing a little on one side playing with the hilt of his sword. What they said I could not catch, but they urged it again and again, and she put her hands to her face exclaiming:—

"No! No! I cannot—I cannot!"

Then Jean stepped forward, dropping on one knee before her, added his entreaty to those of the other two, and one by one we came up and formed a half-circle around them.

"Madame!" said Lanoy, "it is not for the Prince alone. It is for the King, for France. I pledge you my word he succeeds."

"What can I say?" she asked. "Friends!" and she turned towards us, "do you know what I have been asked to do? I have been asked to accept the sacrifice of a life. Jean—our own true knight—has said that he will go to Orleans and bring off the Prince or die."

"He will succeed, madame," said Maligny. "Would to God I could be by his side!"

"Though our persecutors be swifter than the eagles of Heaven, yet the Lord of Hosts is with us. Let him go, madame, that thy beloved may be delivered. Save with thy right hand and hear me," and Chandieu spoke in the words of the Psalmist, his voice deep but low.

But still the Princess stood—hesitating—wavering. Her pale lips moved as if in prayer, and then, as one who takes a sudden plunge, she held out her hands with a quick, impulsive gesture, and, raising Jean to his feet, looked him full in the face with eyes that swam with tears.

"May God bless you!" she said; "be it as you will."

So they stood for a moment, her hands resting on his shoulders. Then bending forwards she kissed him, and with a sob turned and passed out of the room, all following except myself.

It is odd how sometimes, when the mind is distracted, a petty thing will arrest the attention, and remain in the memory for ever, a centre upon which other recollections revolve. As they went out the last to go was Majolais. At the door he stopped, a little spot of brilliant colour, and, turning his head, looked back upon me. In that one moment his eyes seemed to read my thoughts and mock my misery. So he stood for a breath, then, pointing a claw-like finger at me, he turned and fled. It was as if some fiend gibed at my fall. I remained for long where I was, in the shadow of the heavy curtains that drooped over the window, glowering at the band of sunlight on the rushes and thinking of a hundred things. The past year of my life came before me in vivid detail. All my struggles with myself, all my failures. How inch by inch I had slipped down mentally, until it came to pass that I yielded without effort to the hideous whisper of the fiend, when I let Marcilly ride off by himself.

I was certain that Marie loved me still, and that in her heart she would welcome freedom. But an hour or so back it was this that made me long, yet fear, to see him stretched dead in the snow. It was this that made me hate myself, and yet urged me on. Fifty times during the scene with the Princess had I been within an ace of stepping to Marcilly's side, and asking to share his enterprise. Each time I was held back, caught by the throat and held back by my evil thoughts.

To my mind the attempt was impossible. He must die—and then—I became aware I was not alone, for Jean stood at my right hand smiling at me with his kind eyes.

"Gaspard," he said, "I want a friend. You refused me once to-day. Will you deny me now? Will you come?"

I was not altogether lost. I was sick with the shame of what had passed. I dared not refuse.

"I will come," I answered, and my voice was strange, even to my own ears. It was Fate. Who can resist its decrees?

"*Pour ma foy, et mon roy*," he said, linking his arm in mine, as he quoted the motto of his house. "To horse, man! There is not a moment to lose."

CHAPTER VI.

A PRIEST OF BAAL.

"So you think your plans well laid?"

"Yes, and well thought out, Gaspard. The idea has been working in my head for some little time, and what happened to-day has convinced me it is feasible."

"I do not follow."

"I will explain. I owed my life to-day to my likeness to the Prince. When I was at that man's mercy you saw him throw up his sword and pass me?"

"Yes, yes. I remember. Who was he?"

"I know not, but he wore the sash of the King's Carabiniers, and he knew Condé, and mistook me for him. It was astonishing to see the change in his face. 'The Prince! *Mille démons!*' he exclaimed, and went by me like a flash. Now, it is this lucky resemblance which I mean to use to effect Condé's release. But it is necessary to play a bold game, and we will go straight to Catherine and offer our swords to the King."

"Ah, yes! And if madame does not need us we find ourselves laid by the heels, and have a fair chance of our heads shrivelling on the spikes of The Gate of Good Men."

"My friend! There are wheels within wheels here.

Catherine is in sore straits now, and will extend the amnesty to us, I assure you. Even you, Huguenot though you are, can count on her protection if you be for her, as you will be, for the present. When it suits her purpose, she is as much Calvinist as you other heretics. What bee got into your head and made you change your faith I know not. Was it not enough for you to live and die as your forefathers?"

"Let that sleep, Marcilly. A man's conscience is his conscience. It lies between him and his God."

"But if his conscience leads him to heresy it leads him to the stake. However, I say no more, Gaspard. Heretic or true believer, we have shed blood for each other, and we will die, if need be, to keep the foreigner out of France. Let me continue. You know that Marie is with the Medicis. In one sense a prisoner, in the other as free as air. Strange as it may seem, Catherine loves her, despite her rebel husband, as she calls me."

"In other words, madame is a hostage."

"But Catherine has never used her power. A threat of harm to Marie would have paralysed me at once. But, instead of threats, offers of protection have come for me and my friends."

"Punic Faith! The Prince trusted the Florentine. Where is he?"

"But that faith will be kept to us—to all who aid her now. She now sees her danger, and the road open to the Guise if Condé were to die. She would make another Amboise of the Lorrainers if she could."

"You count, then, on the help of that tigress! You deceive yourself."

"No! I do not count on active help, but passive help. Consider for a moment! Madame plays to keep the waning power of the Valois. She knows well enough that if either the Huguenots—forgive the word—or the Guise destroy each other, they will eat up the Valois. The Huguenots, with Condé, made head. She used the Guise to crush them, but events have proved too much for her, and the dragon's teeth she sowed have sprung up against her in full crop. She lends a willing ear to the Chancellor, who has declined to affix the Seal to the warrant. Sancerre has flatly refused to give his assent to the verdict, and Cipierre, the Governor of Orleans, who, as you know, is my uncle, is a deadly foe of the Guise. Fear not! We will keep our heads and succeed."

"And the Guise? You have left out that weight in the scale."

"Well! We shall see which weighs heavier, Italian craft or the sword of Lorraine. But, to go on, the Prince is permitted to see a few friends. The plan is that I will obtain an interview with him, and when I, or rather the Prince comes out, it will be your business to get him to Poitou, and it is for this that I wanted a true friend, Gaspard, and who more true than you! Think you I have forgotten Renty or the Escaillon?"

I could hardly bear his praise; the words seemed to sting like a lash; but I brought myself together and asked: "And you, Marcilly? Do you know what this means for you?"

"I," he laughed, "I will join you in Poitou later on. But we waste time in chattering. Let us hasten!"

He knew as well as I did that he never would see Poitou, and that he was laying down his life for another as cheerfully as if he were going to a minuet. And I rode in bitterness by the side of this man who could be so great whilst I was so small. Shame, black shame, filled my heart, for I was bridle to bridle with one whom I called friend with my lips, but to whom in my soul I was a traitor. I felt that I hated him—hated him who had done me no wrong all the more because I sought to injure him. I linked him unreasonably with the moral degradation into which I had fallen; and the more I recognised the depth to which I had sunk, the hotter grew the fires of my anger. Why did he not die before Châtillon? There would have been nothing then to stand between Marie and myself. Yet with this thought there flashed upon me her own appeal on the night when last we met. She had given me strength then, and I resisted. There came a glow with the memory of that one good deed, a glow of generous impulse that made me feel for a moment again a man. I bent my head to the saddle and prayed for help, a voiceless prayer. Alas! It never got beyond the grey darkness of that night.

To my mind there is no condition more awful than that of the man who is dragged, as it were, to the commission of a crime by an irresistible power, a terrible unseen force that laps round him like a hungry tide, that drives him onwards through mist and fog, despite his struggles, and leaves him at last on the shores of the lost, there to await the last call, there to rot amidst the maddening phantoms of the past, there to repent, if there be aught of advantage in repentance. I have fought with the fiend, struggled at the foot of the cross, prayed, with tears, for strength that danced before me to vanish like the elf-light on a marsh, and then—came back to my sin like a hog to his wallow.

And so it was with me now. At the very moment when I thought I was gaining strength, when I had gone to God with my heart, I fell again. We had come to the Loup Garou, that little stream which, rising in the forest of Villedomain, steals slowly towards the Indre, as treacherous in its crafty strength as the beast from which it takes its name. As we approached the streamlet the sky darkened, the wind rose, the birch trees shook and crackled their dry arms, and the snow began to fall in soft white flakes. It was then, in crossing the lonely forest bridge, that ran on wooden piles from bank to bank, that the evil came to me, like a shadow of the approaching night. Marcilly was in front. One shot from my pistol and Marie and I were free. She would never know—the trees around us were blind and dumb. They would tell no story, and I would lock the secret in my heart. My hand stole towards my holster-flap, and, with a shiver and a start, I drew it back—I had forgotten. It was not only God's eye that saw me. Scarce a hundred paces behind rode Badehorn, and I feared him more than my God. The chance saved me—simple chance, or I had fallen utterly. And yet but a half-hour back I had prayed for help, I had asked the Most High to give

His creature a little strength—and here I was but a hand-breadth from a mortal sin. There are those who will tell me that I was guilty of that crime—that I am guilty now—for I had sinned in my soul if not in deed.

Away in the deep of the forest a dog-wolf howled, a single, long-drawn note of baffled vengeance, of quivering, savage despair. The cry echoed dismally through the birch woods, and was caught up again amongst the oaks and beeches of Loches, until at last it died away, leaving us to the silence of the softly falling snow. It was a fit echo to the horror in my soul.

"It blows chill," exclaimed Marcilly, drawing his cloak closer around him; "'twill be a bad night for the Princess's journey."

"They may halt at Varennes." I wondered I could speak so calmly.

"If Lanoy allows that he is —— but he never will. They must push through somehow to St. Bauld."

"And if they do not?" I was speaking at random; my mind was full of other things.

"Then we are more than half-ruined, and the Guise will hold both the hind and the stag; but, upon my soul, Gaspard, you must be in love, you look so sorrowful. Is it Yvonne de Mailly? She has beauty and birth; but Favras is poor—nothing but that old clock-case, his tower in the Anjoumois. Still, your lands of Vibrac are broad. Hark! What is that!"

As he spoke there was the distant rumbling of thunder, and a chain of light blazed overhead. We all knew what this meant, even the horses. They snorted and trembled, and then their courage came back to them like the brave beasts they were as we went at a hand gallop through the snow.

We had now come to the forest of Loches, that deep, dark wood, which makes a fitting setting to the gloomy stronghold of Louis XI. The darkness gained upon us rapidly, and soon it became more and more difficult to follow the road. Now and then, through the gaps in the trees, through dead arms of beech or oak, we could catch the beacon fire on the tower of Beaulieu, and guided ourselves by its glimmer. We had meant to reach Chenonceaux by the morning. Under ordinary circumstances, and with fresh horses such as we had, this would have been well possible; but now, in the driving mist and in the darkness, we would be lucky if we reached the Indrois with the day, and every moment was of import.

We floundered along at our best pace, which soon became little more than a shamble, for here, in the dark arcades of the forest, the horses sank above their fetlocks in the soft snow, and ever and again we found ourselves in some shallow ravine, or slimy ice-covered pool. We could barely see ten yards ahead, and must have come to a standstill, but for the incessant lightning that flashed through the grey gloom, and lit the endless colonnades of black trees, stretching as far as the eye could reach on every hand. The wind, high and strong, hissed through the damp leaves, bringing down the melting snow that clung to them in great drops, and making the boughs overhead creak and groan like the cordage of a ship. Now the blast would die away in low moanings, then it would circle round, and roar through the forest, and sometimes, amidst the din of the elements, we could hear the sullen, plunging crack of some great bough, or perhaps tree itself, as, worm-riddled and old, it fell heavily to earth.

We tried to head for what we thought to be the north, keeping the fire of Beaulieu to our left; but now this was no longer visible, and so dark had it became, that further progress was all but impossible. It would have been madness, it would have meant death, to halt in the storm, and so we stumbled on as if blind, going we did not know where. And with the issue we had at stake! It was as if the very elements themselves warred against us.

At last we came to what seemed like a steep ascent. Up this we let the horses scramble, until we reached a small tableland bereft of trees, and from the height peered into the darkness around.

"Messieurs!" It was Badehorn who spoke, or rather shouted. "Messieurs! We are all wrong. There is the light of Beaulieu to our right! It should be to our left!"

"Light! There is no light there!" I said, "though we may well be all wrong, as you say;" but even as I spoke, something flared and sputtered redly out of the night.

"That is not Beaulieu; the light is too low," said Marcilly, "but Beaulieu or not, let us make for it, in God's name! 'Tis useless wandering here like evil spirits!"

We hastened towards the light, the position of which we marked as it flashed once more through the darkness. I said hastened—I should have said stumbled towards it. It was necessary, so steep was the slope, to dismount here, and lead the horses, which we did, going down in single file, Marcilly and I groping before us with the points of our drawn swords.

Finally we reached level ground, and headed towards our refuge. It was close at hand, and the horses seemed to know too, for they neighed shrilly, and there was an answering call—the strange, harsh cry of a mule.

In a few steps more, we came to a gate that lay open, and saw the house again clearly by a blaze of lightning. It seemed a large, low, rambling building, with a tower at one end, from which the beacon flared, and Marcilly, who knew every inch of the country, recognised it.

"'Tis the old Château Juvigny, now the abbey-farm of Larçon," he exclaimed, "the largest farmhouse in Touraine. I knew it well. 'Twas here I lay the day before Renaudie died, and but escaped by the skin of my teeth. Gilles de Randan and his Light Horse swooped on the place whilst my bed was yet warm. I wonder a rafter was spared!"

"It was well left for our sakes," I made answer, and battered at the door with the hilt of my sword.

We had to knock long and loudly ere we were heard. A dog barked furiously from within, and at last a shutter opened overhead, a man leaned out, swinging a pine torch in his hand, and called out to us; but the storm bore away his voice. Marcilly began to swear, and Badehorn to kick at the door with his heavy boots; but realising that this was not the way to make things run smoothly, and having no mind to have a brace of slugs through me, I bade them desist, and called out loudly that we were belated travellers in search of a night's lodging, and that we were prepared to pay handsomely for the favour. I had to repeat this twice, so furious was the storm; but at last my voice reached the ears of the clod above, and with a gruff "Wait!" he put down the shutter and vanished.

"This will never do!" exclaimed Marcilly, and he was about to sound a reminder on the door, when we heard the dog yell as if being beaten off, the clanking of chains, the dropping of a bar, and the door opened, letting in a gust of wind and a sheet of snow that all but extinguished the torch held by a man in the hall. Behind his figure we saw three or four others, farm-servants apparently, armed with clubs and pitchforks. It was no time to hesitate, however, and we stepped in, whilst the farmer himself, a short, thickset man, who carried a light axe in his hand, reassured us at once.

"Step in, messieurs! Step in! 'Tis not a night for a dog to be out, let alone honest men! Here, Gondrin! Pierre! See after the horses! Come in, gentlemen! You are not the first to-night—come in! The horses shall be seen to."

There was no doubting the honest tones of the man's voice, and, thanking him, we accepted his invitation, leaving Badehorn to supervise the stabling of the horses, a task from which he returned well pleased with their lodging. Entering, we followed our host into what was once the great hall of the old château, but which was now apparently a kitchen, a dining-room, and a *salon* in one.

As the farmer had said, we were not the first who had sought the hospitable shelter of the abbey-farm that night. In a chair next to the fire was a priest, evidently of high rank—I caught the glitter of the ring on his hand—and close to him were two or three of his following, all dark robed and sombre.

Some distance away, somewhat in shadow, and at the extreme end of the table, where the fag-ends of supper still remained, sat another wayfarer, his head leaning on his arm, staring moodily before him. On our entrance, this man gave a quick glance at us, and then lowered his head again, so that his features were not distinguishable.

The priest took no notice of us, bending low over his breviary, but his suite returned our greetings gravely, and looked at us with interest as we took off our snow-bespattered cloaks, and approached the warmth of the fire, whilst a brace of brown-armed and dark-haired girls laid out some supper—black bread and cheese, warm milk, and a flagon of Rochecorbon; plain and homely fare, but none the less welcome for all that.

On entering the room I had removed the demi-mask I wore as a protection from the weather; but it was not until we reached the full light of the fire that Jean did so, and a look of surprise and astonishment came into the eyes of our host. He glanced from one to the other of us, his hands began to tremble, and so discomposed did he appear, that Jean thought it better to ask to be allowed to sup at once, and, as we took our seats, said something in an undertone to our host, to which the man answered submissively, in an equally low voice.

It was whilst this incident was in progress that I caught the priest's glance, and the slightly amused, slightly mocking smile on his face. It was clear that he had followed every detail of the passage between Jean and the farmer of Larçon. But it was the man's expression, cold, sneering and haughty, that arrested me, and for a moment we stared at each other. Then he bowed to me as to an inferior, courteously but haughtily, the jewel flashed brightly on his finger, and he returned to his book, as if we did not exist. Yet in that one look we exchanged I felt I had met a master-mind, and I had an instinctive foreboding of ill to come from that stern and malign figure.

He was tall and thin, with a receding forehead, an eagle nose, and a cruel line of red lip that contrasted strangely with the pallor of his complexion. But it was the searching light in the grey eyes, flashing beneath the thick, straight brows, that made me feel the man was reading me like an open page. And a presentiment came upon me, that here was one whose path would cross mine to my destruction. I little imagined what that crossing would mean to him, to that man whose eyes were even now fixed on St. Peter's throne. Had Achon of Arles lived, it is not too much to say that the history of France would have been altered, and the eagle of Lorraine grasped the sceptre of my country. He possessed every quality that the Cardinal and his brother lacked. He equalled the Constable in courage and the Italian in duplicity and cunning. In a word, he was a great, bad man, such as a nation sometimes produces to its sorrow, and often to its destruction.

As we took our seats at the supper table, I noticed that the stranger I had first observed had shifted his position, so that his face was from us. At first I paid little heed to this, being hungry, and a little diverted by our host's strange bearing. He looked at me knowingly, and seemed swollen with the consciousness of possessing some great secret. We were, however, relieved of his importunities by the churchman, who summoned him to receive some instructions, and it was then that Marcilly took the opportunity to whisper:—

"Do you recognise the priest?"

"Not I."

"'Tis Achon, Abbot of St. Savin, and now Bishop of Arles. He is St. André's brother."

"So that is Achon! He was at Lyons when I was at the Court. I like not his look."

"Nor I. We have met before, Gaspard, and he does not forget, though it suits him, apparently, not to recognise me. It was he who claimed the Chaumont estates which came to Marie, and he is hand in glove with the Brothers. 'Tis even said that he holds the office of Inquisitor—I fear we are in the wolf's den!"

"There is another here who seems not to wish to recognise any one," and I indicated the bashful stranger, whose back was towards us.

Marcilly was about to reply, when the Bishop rose, and, escorted by the farmer, and followed by his monks, passed down the room. We played our parts and rose too, and as Achon went by, he stopped, and, looking Marcilly full in the face, said:—

"I trust Monsieur le Comte is well."

"Perfectly, monsieur, thanks. I hope to see Monsieur of Arles at Orleans soon."

"At Orleans!"

"Monsieur I have begun to think it is well to fly with the eagle."

"It approaches closer to heaven, my son, than the lily," answered Achon. "I wish monsieur good fortune, a fair flight and good-night," and then, with a short benediction, he retired.

"The wolf shows his fangs. There is danger, Gaspard!"

"Were you not reckless in saying you were bound for Orleans?"

"Not in the least. Candour is part of our game. We no longer cry '*Bourbon, Notre Dame!*'"

Shortly after the host returned, and Marcilly rose, saying he was dog-tired and would go to his chamber. The farmer began to apologise for the accommodation he had to give us. "'Tis but a small room in the beacon tower I must ask messieurs to share. My Lord Bishop has ——"

"We understand, my good fellow, and we thank you as if it were a royal palace. I'll to bed, for it grows late and we ride with the dawn. What! Not coming, Gaspard!"

"Not yet," I answered, and Jean, with a cheery "good-night," and a point-blank refusal to allow the host to accompany him, went off to sleep.

We heard him humming the "Lire, lire, lironfa," as he tramped up the stairs, and then he called for Badehorn.

PART IV.

CHAPTER VII.

MONSIEUR OF ARLES MARKS THE KING.

"MON DIEU! Messire!" said the farmer, "but monsieur there is as like to Monseigneur the Prince of Condé as one egg is to another. I remember last year, when I was factor at Beaulieu, how monseigneur rode there once from Romorantin, to enjoy the chase in the forest of Loches."

"So you have not been here long, then? Yet 'tis an old house."

"Messire! I am but the servant of the Bishop of St. Aignan, whose abbey-farm this is. I came here but a year ago."

"Then, in addition to your kindness, we are indebted to Monsieur of St. Aignan for shelter to-night."

"Speak not of that, messire! I would we had better fare for you, who," and he lowered his voice as he added, "who serve the Prince."

I replied in the same tone. "Ah, indeed! Your information is extensive and your tongue loose," and I glanced at our moody companion, who, however, took no notice of us.

"Pardon!" and the man spoke in whispers, "he sleeps, and will not hear. 'Tis some free companion of the road, I fear. But, messire, I have not forgotten a certain meeting in the woods of Loches. In the dusk of the evening six gentlemen met the Prince of Condé by the oak of King Louis. You know the tree, with its trunk mottled as if with leprosy, and spreading its arms wide enough to shelter a company of horse! These six gentlemen, I say, met the Prince, who came alone, and they spoke it may be for an hour together. The heads of four of the six now wither on the spikes of the castle gates of Amboise. The fifth was a great noble from the north, and the sixth—he was, I remember now, the Sieur de Vibrac, a gentleman of the Ruergue."

"Hist! Fool! How do you know all this?"

"Messire, there was a man in the wood, who had come there by chance and with no evil intent. He was observed and seized. It was thought he was a spy, and the Comte de Ste. Marie would have slain him then and there with his poniard, but you, messire, interposed and saved him. I was that man. It was twilight at the time, and even if it had not been dusk a noble like you would not have remembered me. But I have not forgotten, for life is dear, messire, and you gave it to me once. And so I warn you. There is danger here, and I am powerless to help."

"The Bishop of Arles?" My voice was so low it might have been the humming of a bee.

He but nodded his head, and I went on:—

"Consider your debt paid, and I thank you; but we fear him not."

"Ah, messire! He is bad, bad, and I dread him."

"But we do not, and we will care for ourselves," and now, seeing that the man would talk for ever, and being unwilling to exchange further confidences, I raised my voice, saying, "Maître Pechaud, for I believe that is your name, it grows late ——"

"And Messire de Vibrac would retire. Pardon my chattering. I will but show the way to the chamber."

"Thanks! Yet stay! On second thoughts I will not go now. I have some matters to think upon. But let me not detain you."

"Messire."

"Let it be as I have said, Maître Pechaud. For me it is not yet night," and I lowered my voice once more, saying, "it would perhaps be ill if you and I were seen gossiping together."

"Messire is right. The chamber is on the third storey in the beacon tower, and the stairway in the hall leads straight to it. It cannot be missed. The flask is nearly full, I think."

"Yes, thanks. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, messire!" and he retired, stopping but for a moment to give a respectful greeting to the surly stranger, who made no reply, but sat like a stone, his square shoulders and broad back turned towards us.

Though I observed this rudeness, and might at another time have resented it as it deserved, I did not do so now. My mind was full of other things, and, for all I was concerned, the man was no more to me than a chair or the big press that concealed an angle of the room.

To be brief, it was not Pechaud's warning, nor the strangeness of our meeting that occupied me. My thoughts were more about myself. I seemed to be, as it were, two men in one; to have two souls, one that was for ever combating, though vainly, the other, and evil essence, that was dragging me to the lowest deep. My nerves were not right, and I had determined to spend the night where I was rather than risk further temptation by sharing Marcilly's room. The bridge of the Loup Garou was still fresh in my memory. The horror of the thing I had so nearly done still hung over me. I was afraid of myself. And so I sat and brooded, whilst the snow pattered outside against the glazing of the window, and the logs crackled in the fireplace within. Finally I became calmer, and as I looked around me I noticed that the stranger was still there. I began to be a little curious why he behaved in so odd a manner. Was he, like myself, one whose thoughts gnawed at his vitals? I poured out some white Rochecorbon, acid and thin it was, and toyed with my cup. It was late, and the silence, broken only by the plashing of the snow, and the sputtering of the fire, became intolerable. I was determined to solve the mystery, so, getting to my feet and approaching my companion, I said:—

"Monsieur! Will you do me the honour to drink a cup with me?"

He rose as I spoke, looked me full in the face, and holding out his hands burst out laughing.

"Ah, Vibrac!" he said, "I thought to have tired you out and got away unobserved; but it cannot be, I see. A cup—two cups, with pleasure."

I had gone back a half-pace in astonishment; for as he rose and spoke I recognised my old comrade-in-arms, Ponthieu, of the Trans-Alpine Infantry. We embraced warmly, and were soon by the fireplace pledging each other.

"To meet you, of all people, here!" I said. "And on an affair, too. Else you had not been so retiring."

He nodded and became grave in a moment. "Vibrac, you are with us, I know. You, too, do not journey for pleasure on a night like this."

"No," I said, "but let me give you a warning. There is danger here. Get you gone with the dawn, wherever you are bound."

He sipped at his glass and looked at me keenly. "Vibrac, I know that, and know too I can trust you, although these are times when the father betrays the son, the brother the brother; tell me straight out, for old sake's sake, are you still with the white scarf?" He dropped his voice to a whisper, and I nodded and smiled.

"And the Dumb Captain?"

"*Ce petit homme tant joli*," I quoted a line from the popular ballad the Huguenot soldiers sang about Condé.

The Gascon's tongue began to loosen now.

"Then, as of old, we are brothers-in-arms, and I can ask you for help, for, my friend, I am in a desperate strait."

"What is it?"

"You know how affairs stand at Orleans?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is one chance, and only one chance, of safety. It is with me. If I reach the Constable in three days we may yet save the Prince. But my horse is lame, dead lame. Had this not happened, I would have gone through the storm—but here I am, tied by the leg. Can you lend me a horse?"

"I, too, have my business, Ponthieu, and life hangs on that. We have no spare horse."

"Then Condé dies!" he answered.

"An apple for your penny, Ponthieu—Condé will not die."

He snapped his fingers. "You little know the Lorrainers. But I have that which would cut their combs had I but four swift hoofs beneath me. See here, Vibrac! We are all hilt-deep in this business. If Condé dies, we die. Think of something."

I kicked at the fireplace with my boot, and racked my brains until a thought—it was a forlorn hope—struck me.

"I have no horse to lend, Ponthieu, but," and I smiled at the idea, "there is a chance. Perhaps the Bishop of Arles has one in the stable. Why not borrow it and go?"

He slapped his thigh and laughed out loudly, a big, strong laugh.

"Blood of a Jew! as we used to say in the Sicilies. Vibrac, you will die a marshal. The idea is excellent, and there is no time like the present. Ha! ha! ha!" and he rose to his feet.

"It is too early—wait till the little hours. If things go wrong, and the papers on you ——"

"Never let your soup grow cold. It must be now or never. If I am caught, 'tis but a blank paper they will find; but you know the secret—a trifle of water, and—*pff!* No! I will have no help—you are mad my good friend, think of your own affair."

"True!" I answered. "You are right; but take my advice, and wait. You will lose your way—never get through the storm."

"Way or no way, storm or no storm, I must risk it, and to-morrow Monsieur of Arles will have to exercise some of that Christian resignation he has no doubt often preached about."

Nothing I could say would dissuade him, and I more than regretted my speech. His preparations were quickly made. He but buckled his sword tighter, drank another cup of Rochecorbon, and unbarred the window.

"It is cold," he said, as he looked out, "and snowing swords."

"Be advised, Ponthieu!"

But he shook his head, and wrung my hand. Then he hung over the window for a moment, and dropped into the snow. As I closed the shutter, I saw him, a dark figure, crossing the dim shaft of light that ran out into the night, and a moment after he was lost in the dark. With a shiver I put up the bar, and turned back to my seat at the fire.

I was alone now. Ponthieu had made no allusion to our last meeting; but, rough soldier as he seemed, he was possessed of rare tact. And now he had gone on his reckless mission. I had given my right hand to have gone with him. It was a jest worth the playing. But it was impossible. I was bound to Marcilly, and the odds were heavy enough against us to tempt the most desperate gambler with life. With solitude my thoughts came back to me and racked me. I had sought for the bread of strength, and come back with a stone. All this may be nothing to you who pass by, but where could I turn for help? I who was fighting for my soul. As evil thoughts steal into the heart like a fog, as good thoughts come to us like sunlight through the mist, so once again the light flashed on me, and I swore to myself to tear up the past, and face my sorrows like a man. Sleep was impossible. My nerves were too strung for that. I leaned back, and staring into the fire, began to think. My dishonour was known but to myself, and with God's grace I would win back my own self-respect. The past could not come back; but there was still the future—and hope. I would fight this battle of the soul here to-night—here, as I sat alone. Alone, did I say? No; I had a hundred companions. Out of the shadows in the room, out of the dull-red embers in the fireplace, out of the forked flames they came in troops to me, grey phantoms of sin and shame. There was one, that red-handed spirit of murder, that could almost hail me brother. There were others, winged regrets that flitted to and fro. There were the ghosts of high hopes and noble aspirations, that floated before me with veiled faces and downcast heads. But through all this the new-born strength was coming to me. I would be true to Marcilly, true to myself; and when it was over, if I lived—well, the world was wide, and Gaspard de Vibrac would find a new life in distant lands. It was as if from afar a soft voice called to me, "Come unto Me ye that are weary". I sank on my knees, and then—some one laughed behind me. I sprang to my feet and faced round, and standing before me was a tall, black-robed figure, with a white face and shining eyes. It was Achon.

"Monsieur," he said, the bitter laugh still on his lips, "I want a word with you."

"I—I thought ——" I stammered; I was completely taken by surprise.

"That Achon of Arles was some one else," he put in; "you will see him in time, Monsieur de Vibrac, not yet. You will see him where hope shall be cut off, and trust shall be as a spider's web."

But I was myself by this. "Monseigneur! You speak in riddles—and strangely, for a prince of the Church."

He looked at me keenly. "The Church—what is it that you know of the Church, monsieur? You, a heretic! You were praying. Think you such prayers as yours are heard? You might as well have cast them to the wind that howls outside. It is the Church, the Church alone, that can save you and yours, monsieur. But enough of this! It is of other matters I came to speak, and to be brief, I overheard most of your talk with your friend."

I glanced at the large press that stood in the corner of the room, and then at him.

"Precisely. You have uncommon intelligence. There is a door behind that, and space to stand."

"And so you played the spy—well, what is your point?"

His eyes flashed. "I am coming to that. It has been my painful duty to have your friend arrested. There were watchers by my poor mule. I have no horse, but I am an old soldier."

"Ponthieu has failed then?"

"Ponthieu has failed," he repeated dryly. "Ponthieu is at present in safe hands, and to-morrow Ponthieu will rest in the *cachots* of Loches—where I have a great mind to send you, Monsieur de Vibrac."

I flushed hotly, and my hand stole to the hilt of my sword.

"Put back your hand, monsieur; a blow from your sword would only kill a poor priest, but you would be broken on the wheel, and you are not yet ready to die. I watched you wrestling with yourself, and I repeat, you are not yet fit to die. Even that poor fool, Ponthieu, is better prepared than you, and as for Marcilly—he has a good conscience and sleeps soundly—but you—you cannot sleep."

"Man! Be careful! There is danger in the air."

"But not for me, De Vibrac—for you, perhaps, who risk broad lands and an honourable name. A moment ago the *cachots* yawned for you, but now I have other plans."

There was something in his air, in his haughty speech and bearing, that overawed me. He was reading me like an open page.

"I ——" I began, but he stopped me with a wave of his hand.

"Understand, monsieur, that I do not send you to join Ponthieu because I have other need of you. I have enough against you—even against Marcilly—to have you both put to the question, and to send you to the block—and you know the Edict of Romorantin. If you forget I will refresh your memory. Under the secret clause, the punishment for all spiritual offences remains in the hands of the bishops, and there is one to whom our Lord the Pope and His Majesty have confided the trust of the Holy Office, and he stands before you. But, I want you for other things, as I said, and it has occurred to me that it would be well if you appeared a free agent."

"Monseigneur, you are pushing too far."

"Bah! This is an abbey-farm of my brother of St. Aignan, Vibrac, and I have gloves for the cat. I have ten stout fellows with me. I lodged them in the barns without for purposes of my own. Six stand now in the hall, and you would gain nothing by violence—you would be shot down like a mad dog—you grasp the position?"

I did. I was a campaigner old enough to know that I was outgeneralled, and my only chance was to play fox against fox.

"I see," Achon continued, "you are sensible. You and Marcilly are going to Orleans. I could make sure that you did go to Orleans, but I will take a risk—I will let you go on one condition."

There was all our game at stake. A false move now and nothing could save us. The cards were decidedly with the Bishop.

"The condition?"

"A very simple one—merely that you present yourself to me, in the castle at Orleans at noon, five days hence, and there, in the presence of Lorraine and the Chancellor, repeat what Ponthieu told you."

"It is impossible—it would be too dishonourable."

"I will put it another way—I will repeat what Ponthieu told you, and I will ask you to bear witness to my truth. Do you agree?"

"If I refuse?"

"The *cachots*—and the rack. Both you and Marcilly."

There was, truly enough, little choice in the matter, and in five days many things might happen. I could have slain him where he was, but to what purpose? I watched him as he stood, a whistle to his lips.

"Very well, monseigneur—I agree."

"I have the word of Vibrac?"

I bowed. I could not trust myself to speak.

"That is right. The *cachots* are uncomfortable, almost as uncomfortable as the Chausse d'Hypocras of the Châtelet, where your friend the Vidame is, though they say he has been moved to the Tournelles."

"One word, monseigneur! Ponthieu—he is my friend——"

He held up his jewelled hand. "Enough, monsieur! I did not come here to discuss Ponthieu. He is safe, and beware at any attempt at rescue. As for his skin, it rests with himself to keep it, as it rests with you to keep yours. One thing yet, ere I go, De Vibrac, and I tell you this because you are not quite like other men, and you have interested me. We have met before, though you do not recall it. But I know you—you have trouble there," and he touched me over the heart, and looked me in the face, with keen, searching eyes as he went on: "When you have done with me at Orleans, go back and grow cabbages at Vibrac for the rest of your life. You will be a happier man." He paused, and then continued, "You start with the dawn. I wish you good fortune, and dispense with the blessing, for you are a heretic—and forget not—I can break you with a turn of my little finger."

He turned and went. Outside in the hall I heard the shuffling of feet, and then all was silence.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE SIGN OF THE GREEN MAN.

FOR a moment I stood thinking of Achon's last words, and then it all came back to me. It was he who had played the mendicant friar in Paris that night when Lignières died. It was he who had got the letters and the scroll of names. He was right. He held enough in his hands to bring Marcilly and myself to the block, and to ruin the honour of Marie. Then there was Ponthieu—come what may, I was resolved that he should have a blow struck for him. I felt as if I was personally responsible for the ill-luck that had overtaken him. But for what I had said he would never have undertaken the rash enterprise that had brought him to misfortune, and I could not leave him to his fate. My mind had for the moment righted itself, and I was once again Gaspard de Vibrac. Other things also urged me powerfully. The mortification of being outwitted and browbeaten by the priest moved me to hot anger. The shame of being overlooked and mocked at during my struggle with myself burned in my veins, and mingled with the desire to do something for Ponthieu was a savage resentment against Achon. It would have gone hard with Monsieur of Arles had we met at that juncture.

Swelling like an asp with rage, and dagger in hand, I stepped up to the press, passing between it and the wall. There was the door by which Achon had entered, and it was half open. He had doubtless not closed it behind him when he came in, for fear of any noise attracting our attention. I cautiously pushed it back. Before me lay a long and narrow corridor, half in darkness and half in light. Up this I crept softly, feeling on either hand for anything like a door. I was confident that if I could find one, it would lead to Achon's apartment, and then I would show him if De Vibrac feared to die. There was no result, however, to my search. At last I was brought to a standstill by a dead wall. I tapped it gently with my fingers, placed my ear against it, and searched the surface keenly, but with no avail. My eyes could see nothing. My hand but met the rough, uneven surface of the stonework. The secret of the passage, wherever it was, was too well concealed for me to discover in the short time at my disposal, and disappointed, but not despairing, I returned as I had come.

I resolved to seek Marcilly, and went out into the hall. A small lantern burned there dimly, and above me curled the brown spiral of the stairway that led to our chamber. Taking the lantern in my hand, I went up, and knocked again and again at the door without receiving any reply. A fear seized me that perhaps Marcilly had come to harm; but just as I was about to put my shoulder to the door and attempt to stave it in, I heard Jean's voice.

"Is that you, Gaspard?"

"Yes, I —— Open!"

The door swung back, and I saw Badehorn sleepily rubbing his eyes, and muttering apologies; beyond him, Marcilly lay half-dressed on the bed, his sword on a stool beside him.

As I put down the lantern and closed the door, he said:—

"What! Have you been keeping a vigil, or has the bashful stranger proved good company at last?"

"Yes, and no, Marcilly; but something has happened whilst you and Badehorn slept like the dead, and we must act." And, sitting on the bed beside him, I told him briefly, but clearly, what had occurred. When I had done, he remained silent for a moment, and then exclaimed:—

"We can do nothing now!"

"But Ponthieu ——"

"*Mon ami!* Ponthieu, and you, and I are playing for our lives. If we lose the game, we pay the stake. I understand how you feel in the matter; but, and you know why, we cannot risk anything now."

"I know, and yet ——"

"Listen! As I said, I know what you feel, and were things otherwise, would have made a dash to free him. But, consider for a moment. We are now in the small hours. We know not our way about this rambling house. We know not where Ponthieu is lodged, and it would be simply courting disaster to do what is in your heart. I think, too, we can serve him best now by doing nothing here, but using our influence at Orleans. Our Gascon is too insignificant for much fuss to be made about him, and a thousand écus of the sun would free him—be tranquil!"

"I see you are right, but I have so much on my soul already. I would give the lands of Vibrac to free Ponthieu."

Marcilly laughed as he rose from the bed. "Your nerves are unstrung, Gaspard. This comes of not sleeping; as for your trouble of conscience, I would give much to change the weight on my soul, friend, for that which lies on yours—you will look back in ten years, and smile at your burden of to-day."

I turned my head aside, but he went on. "There is one thing that troubles me, and that is your promise to Achon. Edict or no edict, we can laugh at his threats, and for these we will burn his Abbey of St. Savin over his head the next ride we take with Rambure's Horse—but your promise ——"

"It must be kept."

"You will have to ride post from Poitou to do so"—he was dressing as he spoke—"but, Ste. Croix! What a fool I have been! I doubt if you will ever do that ride, Gaspard. Do you not see what this meeting at Orleans five days hence means?"

"No."

"It is clear as daylight to me. Achon is hilt-deep with the Guise in their plans. 'Tis more than whispered that he is the brain behind the Cardinal. He overheard your conversation with Ponthieu. He knew that the letter the Gascon carried concerns the safety of the Prince. He has the letter with him now, presumably, and Ponthieu has given away the secret of reading a blank paper. Yet this meeting between Lorraine and the Chancellor—sworn enemies until now—is to take place five days hence; do you begin to see?"

"I think so; you mean that the execution of the sentence against Condé is delayed."

"Precisely. And this goes with what I told you before. There will be delays. We shall have more time than we thought we had, and we shall save Condé. *Parbleu!* You will attend the meeting before starting for Poitou, and now for the hour."

He buckled on his sword, and stepping to the window opened the shutter. The storm had passed. It had ceased snowing, and morning was at hand. The forest lay beneath us, but we could make out nothing except a confused mass of dun shadow, streaked here and there with patches of white. Above it shifted an uneasy sea of cloud, through which, in the distant west, still glimmered the beacon fire on Beaulieu. Above the clouds there was a faint light, which, weak as it was, paled the glow of the lantern, and as we looked, a cock crowed shrilly.

"Hark!" exclaimed Marcilly, "day at last! It is time to start. Badehorn—the horses."

And in a half-hour we were trotting through the snow towards Chenonceaux.

Our way was still through the chill arcades of the forest, yet dripping with melting snow. At first we were almost numbed with the cold, but the quick motion soon warmed our blood. Each moment it became lighter, and there was every prospect of the mild winter of the Land of Quinces giving us a fair day, such a storm as that of the night being unusual in the Orléanais. Although I had not slept, my mental excitement kept me unwearied; the interest of the adventure had seized hold of me, and in the struggle I had with myself I believed I had cast off the serpent's skin of disloyal thought to my friend, and had no fear that I would reclothe myself in it. Now and again I was haunted by the recollection of Ponthieu; but I could not help reflecting that Marcilly was right, and that the best thing for my poor friend was to wait until we reached Orleans, and there use our influence, which was not small, to get him freed. It was running a risk, and it would have been more to my taste to have cut for him with the sword; but we did not even know where he was confined, and our enterprise would not permit us to linger on the heels of time. I say this in defence of what might otherwise have seemed unworthy conduct on my part. In this miserable confession of my folly and sin I have been utterly honest, and I cling, God alone knows why, to the memory of every small action that goes to show I was once not wholly lost.

What Marcilly was thinking of I know not. Perhaps in this early dawn he was reflecting on the sacrifice he was about to make. As far as he was concerned, he was going to almost certain death. Mayhap some thought of this was working in his mind, as for once his cheery light heart seemed to have left him, and he rode with his head held down, and his hat pulled over his brow.

And so we went on in silence through the grey morning, and keeping Chartreuse du Liget to our right, we at length saw the mouldering old church of Genille, built in the eleventh century, and knew then that the Indroye was at hand, and the tortuous passage of the forest coming to an end. We crossed the Indroye by the bridge below Genille, and in a mile or so had entered the Champeigne, the chain of barren clay hillocks that separates the valley of the Cher from that of the Indre.

"There is the Etang de la Gauvrie," exclaimed Marcilly, rousing himself, and pointing to a blue splash below us; "that little stream trickling from it falls into the Cher at Chenonceaux. It is full of fat waterfowl."

"Was it not in the reeds in the banks that Coqueville hid for two days after Amboise?"

"Yes, and but escaped by a hair. St. Gris! But this is a stiff descent!"

We were on the top of a table-land as we spoke, and the descent wound steeply down to the lake, and it was near the end of this that a slight misfortune befel us. I was riding a little behind, and Marcilly turned in his saddle to say something. At this moment his horse stumbled and fell, bringing his rider down with him. He was on his feet in a moment, however, and was examining the horse's hoof as I came alongside and anxiously asked:—

"Are you hurt?"

"No, Gaspard; but the very devil of ill-luck dogs us. The horse is lame."

"It is a good omen though that you have escaped."

"True enough! But the delay."

"It cannot be helped. Fortunately Chenonceaux is at hand. Take Badehorn's horse, and let us hasten on. We will get another beast there."

Badehorn had dismounted ere this, and Marcilly jumped on his nag. Bidding him lead the lame horse to the Green Man, at Chenonceaux, we pushed on with all the speed the country permitted, and in a little under an hour were in the parlour of the inn, awaiting the coming of Badehorn and the return of a messenger whom we had sent for horses. I forced myself to eat something, and whilst my friend lay back in his chair and exercised his patience by staring at the logs crackling in the fireplace, I stretched myself on a settee near the window, and looked wearily out through the glazing. The window opened on the little square of the village, now crowded with people, for it was market day, and beyond rose the grey donjon, the towers and galleries of the château of Chenonceaux, built by Bohier, the Receiver-General of Normandy, on the remains of an old fifteenth-century fortress. The financier died before the building was completed, and his son, the Baron de St. Cyergue, a man of egregious vanity, made the château a gift to La Valentinois, who, on her downfall, was forced to part with it for a song to Catherine de Medicis, for whom it was held now by Monsieur de Rabutin, a gentleman of the Tarantaise. I had not met St. Cyergue since the affair in the Bouton d'Or. News had however reached us that having totally lost his fortune, he had retired to a small house he owned at Chenonceaux; though whenever he could scrape together a hundred or so, he returned to take his place amongst the hangers-on of the Court. So, whilst idly recalling these things, I dropped off to sleep, until I was suddenly aroused by a loud laugh, and starting up saw a man, extravagantly dressed, engaged in converse with Marcilly. It needed but a look at the vacant face, the protruding eyes, the puffed breeches, the scarlet cloak, and the faded gold lace of the coat-of-arms embroidered on the left breast of his pourpoint, to tell it was St. Cyergue himself.

"Ah, ha!" he exclaimed. "So you are awake at last! Faith! I thought you were sleeping as soundly as poor Lignières does at St. Merri—we buried him there you know."

"Let that matter rest, St. Cyergue," I said, but he went on:—

"It was neat—devilish neat, Marcilly. *Ça! Ça!* And he had our wit, our duellist Lignières, spitted like a lark, and he never spoke again. I only saw that thrust equalled once, when pinked Richelieu—the man they call 'The Monk' ——"

"The Baron has just left the Court," interrupted Marcilly, forcing a change in the talk. "He confirms what we heard about Condé."

"That is good news if it remains true. And how long have you been here, Baron?"

"I arrived but last night, though it seems a year. I lost a thousand écus of the sun to De Billy, and it has become necessary to take a change of air until my rents come in."

"St. Cyergue puts it down to the écus, Gaspard," said Marcilly, "but we know better. A few paltry crowns would not drive the Baron from Court. Come, tell us, Baron."

"There are things one does not speak of, messieurs," he said with a simper, and winked his hare-like eyes.

"Quite right, St. Cyergue! Though I little thought you would ever be a conspirator."

"Conspirator! I! *Diable!* But you mistake. It was an affair—a grande dame, if you must know."

"Keep your secret, Baron. Yet such a man as you are must have his hands full of affairs."

"Oh, no! No! Perhaps one or two; but that is all. Still, there was something of excitement about this one, and, as we are all friends here, I will tell you. You know De Semiers—tall, thin, with a nose like a vulture, and a heart as jealous as a Spaniard's. Well, he raised a fuss about madame, and we had a pass or so on the parvis of Ste. Croix. He was a child in my hands, I assure you, and in the shake of a sparrow's tail it was all over, and monsieur was pinked through the ribs, and will have to keep his bed for a month. Now, *mordioux!* as the Gascons say, what do you think happened? Madame herself made an outcry; your uncle Cipierre sent his Swiss after me; and it would have gone hard with St. Cyergue, I assure you, but for that business at the storming of Calais, when I drove the English back, and another I will not name took the credit. So what with this, and my losses at play, I judged it best to retreat for a time. But you must sup with me to-night; I have some rare old Romanée, soft as velvet, and as light as air."

"A thousand thanks, but I fear we cannot have that honour, Baron. We but await fresh horses to push on to Orleans."

He was still pressing us, however, when the landlord made his appearance to say that Badehorn had arrived, and he added to this the bad news that other horses were not procurable in Chenonceaux. Perhaps, however, if we sent to Bléré, or Montrichard, we might get them by to-morrow.

"What!" I said, "it is market day. Your yard is humming with clients. All the countryside is here, and no horses for sale or hire?"

"Monsieur can judge for himself. They have asses and mules enough, but no horses for sale or hire—it is indeed true." And then he added, as if with an inspiration, "Perhaps Monsieur de Rabutin would be able to lend you horses, messieurs".

"The Governor of the Château?"

"Monsieur, the horses of the Queen-Mother are there."

"It is worth trying," I began; but now St. Cyergue stepped in to rescue us from our difficulty, and very good-naturedly offered to lend us two horses of his own, adding at the same time that they were gifts to him from the Duke of Guise.

And hardly waiting for our acceptance, he bade the landlord fetch them at once from his house. I confess, however, that until the beasts actually appeared, I had some small doubts of my own of their existence. As to their being a present from Guise, that was of a piece with the tales of his other adventures, the conceit of the man being such that he surrounded every moment of his life with imaginary exploits, which he fully believed he had himself performed. Nevertheless his good-nature was so great that he would have divided his last livre wth a total stranger, had he been asked, and it was in this way that he had been wheedled out of the fine estate of Chenonceaux by Madame La Grande Seneschale, whose avarice was as great as her effrontery. We had, of course, no intention of profiting by his easy disposition, and knowing he was in straits, and being unwilling to borrow his nags, we prevailed upon him to sell them to us for a hundred crowns apiece, which, after some demur that the price we offered was too great our friend finally accepted. We would still have to take one of our own horses with his two, but Badehorn rode a light weight, and we had but a bare twenty leagues before us, as the crow flies, to reach Orleans. It was now past midday, so, leaving the remaining two of our beasts with St. Cyergue, we mounted and prepared to set out, having hopes to reach Nanteuil by evening, where we could rest the horses and ourselves in the house of M. de Villequier.

Wishing the Baron good-bye, and a speedy termination of his temporary exile, and bearing from him a number of confused messages to the greatest personages in France, which we promised faithfully to deliver, we rode out of the crowded courtyard of The

Green Man into the little square of Chenonceaux at the same moment that M. de Rabutin, the Captain of the Castle, who was taking an airing on foot with a half-dozen of his friends, entered it at the other end.

PART V.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW PONTHIEU CARRIED THE ADMIRAL'S LETTER.

IT was market day, as I have said, and the little square was full to overflow with a chaffering, haggling crowd, that pressed round the shelter of the shops, and squeezed, pushed and shouted about the stalls and booths erected in the open, on the rough and still sleet-covered cobble stones of the uneven pavement. We made our way slowly through the heaving mass of red-faced and brown-handed country folk, all talking at the same time, and in the same breath retailing some gossip of the hamlet side, and holding fast to a deal, or throwing in a prayer to St. Jean of Bléré as they beat down a price.

We rode past pigs, cattle and sheep, booths full of leather work from Château Renault, rough pottery from Tours and the Sologne, woollen material from Amboise, iron and copper ware, and cheap haberdashery from Blois and Orleans. There were stalls where chestnuts were roasting, and a warm wheat cake, a handful of hot chestnuts, and a draught of fresh milk were to be had for a brown piece. We were detained for a moment by an altercation between some soldiers of the garrison and a sutler from Montrichard, who had tried to palm off on them a skin of white Joué as a true Côte d'Or, and but escaped this to fall under the eye of a mad friar, who had climbed on to a cart laden with rye, or buckwheat flour, and from that elevation denounced the vengeance of heaven on the sins of Chenonceaux. His glance fell on us, and we at once became subjects for his invective. We, of course, took no notice, and pushed on, to find, this time, that we were completely hemmed in by a crowd that rushed to form a ring round a juggler, who prepared to show his wonders, whilst his companion, a black-eyed, dark-browed, and comely Arlesienne, beat a tambour, as she sang the shepherd's song of her country to the morning star, "La Belle Maguelonne," and coppers flew thick and fast. I thought that we had shown sufficient consideration to these *canaille* in not riding some of them down ere this, and was about to vent my impatience, when I was checked by Marcilly.

"*Mon ami!*" he said, "let them be, these are the bread-winners of France."

I knew he was right, and, feeling the reproof, reined back from him. We were, however, relieved from our difficulty by M. de Rabutin and his friends, who, using their canes freely for their own passage, soon caused the crowd to surge back, and opened a way for us.

We rode forwards, and would have passed De Rabutin and his companions, but, perhaps a little excited, they stood before our horses, still flourishing their canes and wearing a threatening aspect, until Marcilly called out:—

"Have a care, De Rabutin! Do you not know us?"

"Jean de Marcilly, as I live, and De Vibrac, too!" exclaimed De Rabutin, dropping his cane. "Where in the world have you sprung from, and where do you ride to?"

"To Orleans, De Rabutin, and we are hard pressed, else we had stayed at the château for a cup of d'Arbois."

"And heartily welcome! Will you not do so now?"

"I fear we cannot, for our time is short, and we would have to fight the great St. Cyergue, whose invitation we have been compelled to refuse as well."

The Captain of Chenonceaux laughed, and insisted on walking by us as far as the bridge, over which he said he would give us safe conduct. We stopped on the other side to say farewell, when we were startled by a sudden roar of voices that came from behind, and, turning round, saw the crowd swaying and parting before a mounted man, who, bare-headed, white-faced, and spattered with mud, urged his horse through the press, now striking to the right, then to the left, with the flat of his drawn sword.

It was Ponthieu, as I lived! Ponthieu, who had somehow escaped the clutches of Achon, and was making a brave bid for freedom.

"Name of the devil!" roared De Rabutin. "Stop him! Seize him!"

There were half a dozen mounted men at the bridge close to us, and in an instant swords had flashed out, and the way was barred, but it was all or nothing now, and with a reckless shout of "*Bourbon, Notre Dame!*" Ponthieu spurred across the bridge and came straight for us.

Things that take but a moment to happen should take but a moment to tell. Our swords were out, too, now; but we cut for Ponthieu as he came up, and he dashed into us in the confusion caused by our sudden assault in his favour. Marcilly's reins were seized by De Rabutin with a cry of "traitor!" but Jean leaned forward and struck the Tarantaise with the hilt of his sword, and he fell backwards, but rose staggering to his feet. Ponthieu was hard pressed. Once he thrust at me, and it was but a chance that I managed to turn his point. At another time he was all but overpowered, but I ran the trooper who was on him through, and the man fell forwards with a sob.

"Courage, Ponthieu!" I cried, and then he recognised me.

"Good friend!" he said, and the next moment we were free.

"Gallop! Gallop!" It was Jean's voice at my bridle rein, but we needed no word to urge us as we dashed forwards, Ponthieu at my right hand and Badehorn, who had cunningly got clear at the beginning of things, a good quarter-mile ahead.

Ah! But it was with a glad heart that I rode on. I had felt Ponthieu's fate to be like a millstone round my neck, and now he was free, and it was my sword that had helped to free him! It was to me an omen of the future, and for very lightness of soul I could have turned back for yet another pass with De Rabutin's men, who came pressing behind, cursing us as they fired their pistols after us in vain.

We all but gave them the slip in the forest of Amboise. Here, whilst we galloped through the withered, but wet and dripping underwood, tearing our faces and hands with the thorns and overhanging branches, the grey tree trunks flitted by like shadows, and the white snow-covered glades seemed to open and shut like fans as we sped past them. Beneath us we could hear the breathing of the horses, and behind came shout and halloo, answered by a hundred echoes, until the dim forest seemed to ring again with the voices of those who sought our death. But our horses went fast, and we rode hard, for safety lay in front and there was no mercy behind, and at last cry and echo died away, and there was a silence. We had distanced them, as we thought, and we pulled up for a moment to breathe the nags.

"We must take to the open Sologne if we wish to reach Nanteuil," said Marcilly, loosening a holster flap, and turning sharply to our right, we trotted out of the cover of the trees into the rough moorland.

It was a necessary but unfortunate thing, for as we rode out we were spied once more by the troopers, and with a yell they came on. It was perhaps well for us that there were not more than about half a dozen of them. As I turned in my saddle to glance back, I noticed that there was but this number at our heels, and could we but reach the Beuvron there was every chance of safety amongst the yoke elms and chestnuts of Russy. For ourselves, I felt this was possible, but as I looked at Ponthieu, and saw the heaving flanks of his horse, I began to fear for the issue of our ride. It would, of course, be impossible to desert him now; at any hazard we must stand or fall together. The Gascon caught my eye as I looked up from his horse and laughed at me.

"There is a half-mile or so in him yet, Vibrac," and he swung his sword, and hallooed the horses on.

We had a good start, but our beasts were already nearly blown, and we began to feel that the end could not be far.

"We must fight at the Masse," said Marcilly, as he brought his nag with an effort alongside mine.

"Now, if you like," I answered; but he shook his head, and pointed before him to the low line of willows that showed where the Masse crept. How we rode for those few hundred yards! How the very horses seemed to know the danger behind! And somehow we managed it, all four of us, though, as we splashed out of the stream and up the opposite bank, our pursuers were not more than a hundred paces away. As we gained the bank, Ponthieu sprang from his saddle, pistol in hand.

"Go on, friends!" he said, "my horse is beaten, and you have risked too much for me already—save yourselves!"

But Jean laughed as he faced round, and we four of us, brought to bay, waited for De Rabutin.

After he was felled by Marcilly, he must have seized a trooper's horse and followed us, and we could see him now, utterly weaponless, riding well ahead of his men, his face red with the blood of his wound, and his pourpoint splashed and torn. As they came up, however, his men, seeing we were determined to fight to the last, that we were well armed and desperate, wavered and hesitated.

Not so did Rabutin; he was mad with anger and shrieked at them as they slackened rein, and began to move forwards slowly.

"Cowards! Dogs! Would you halt now? See, there are but four of them! On! On! God save me! Am I followed by a pack of serving-wenches or men-at-arms?"

And as he stormed, Marcilly shouted to him: "Go back, De Rabutin! We have no quarrel with you. Go back!" But the sound of Jean's voice seemed to drive him to frenzy.

"You—you ——" he said, shaking his clenched fist at us, and, all swordless as he was, plunged into the stream, followed for very shame by his men.

Our hands were being forced, and I felt that what was to follow would not be on our heads; but now Jean raised his pistol and shot De Rabutin's horse dead, and man and beast together fell into the icy water of the Masse. His men needed no further inducement to retreat than the fall of their leader, and, turning rein at once for the opposite shore, galloped off, leaving De Rabutin to his fate. He managed to scramble to the bank thoroughly cooled by his drenching, and wishing him a pleasant walk back to Chenonceaux—a good wish that he answered with a curse—we rode on, now thanking our lucky stars at our escape, now laughing at the sorry figure poor De Rabutin cut as he crawled out of the water.

"We have made an enemy for life," said Marcilly, "and the worst of it is that the Tarantaise has something of right on his side. He will make the Court ring with his complaints."

"And we with laughter, as we tell how monsieur took a bath in the Masse ere he walked to Chenonceaux," I answered.

"As for right on his side," said Ponthieu, "*Cap de Diou!* he holds no commission as a catchpoll. What right had he to hunt us to death like a stag. My faith! It was in my heart to have ended his hunting for all as he struggled in the water."

The Gascon had excuse for what he said, and, as we crossed the Bièvre, that little child of the Beuvron, we slackened pace, now feeling secure from further pursuit, and Ponthieu, who had completely regained his spirits and good temper, told us how he escaped.

"You must know, friends," he said, "that when I dropped out of the window, I knew no more than the road to the moon where I was, but after some groping I reached the stable where my lame nag stood. He was close to yours, and for once I was tempted to take the chance Providence had thrown to my hand, and assist myself to one of your beasts."

"If you had, Ponthieu ——"

"We would not have been such good friends as we are now, but I should have been within a league of Yvoy le Marron, where the Constable lies. To make the story short, I resisted the temptation for our friendship's sake, De Vibrac, and sought the next stall, to find there a mule—a yellow mule as I live—nevertheless he seemed a stout beast, and would serve at a pinch. I looked round to see if any one was by, but there was no one watching, so I made a shift to go back to my own horse to fetch his saddle. As I came out of the stall into the flagged passage, a light suddenly flashed before my eyes, and some one struck at me. I started back, luckily, or else I had never spoken again, but the blow grazed my good steel cap, and sent me flying. The next moment I was seized and pinned down. I made a struggle for it, as you may think, and shouted out for help, the Lord knows why, for I knew well enough there was no help at hand; but all was useless. There were four men against me—stout fellows—and in a twinkling I was gagged and bound. Then they took away my arms and money, and searched me. But they did not find what they wanted, and at last one of them flashed the lantern again in my face as he asked me roughly:—

"Where is the letter?"

"Oh, ho!" I said to myself, as it came to me in a moment that there was more in this than I thought, and that there must have been a traitor somewhere.

"The traitors were our own tongues, Ponthieu; every word of our talk was overheard by Achon."

He looked at me, his black eyes staring with astonishment.

"Overheard! Impossible! There was not a soul in the room."

"We both forgot that big press, Ponthieu. Achon lay in wait behind that. But go on with your story. I will tell you mine later on."

"*Cap de Diou!* That explains things," he said. "And to go on. At the demand for the letter, I thanked the saints in my heart that the Admiral had given me a decoy duck, an empty sealed packet, which I had sewn in my vest, whilst the real letter, the blank paper itself, lay on the inside of the sole of my boot."

"Then Achon never got that?" I eagerly asked.

Ponthieu laughed as he stuck out his left foot. "It is here," he said, as he went on: "I, of course, could not answer, but mumbled something under the gag, and, seeing this, they undid the bandage, and asked the question again, the man who had first spoken saying that if I would keep my skin I had best speak out at once. I pretended to be overcome with fear, and told them of the letter, begging with a trembling voice for my life. They cut open my vest in a moment, and when they found the letter, I began to implore and entreat again for my life, saying I would tell all if they would but free me.

"'Ugh!' said one of them, as he gave me a kick. ''Tis the whitest-livered cur I have seen—the *cachots* are too good for him—he is best in the stocks.'

"Then, despite my protestations, they gagged me again, and flung me into the loft of the stables, bidding me lie there till the morning, and though I ached with the pain of the chords, I laughed in my heart to think that my letter was safe as yet. *Boun!*" he exclaimed, with his strong southern accent, "*Boun!* It was safe as yet; but for how long! That I could not tell. Through the chill hours I lay there, till I heard the cock crow, and there was a bustle, and you all departed. I could hear your voices, but could neither speak nor move."

"By heaven! If we had known you were so close, Ponthieu, we would have struck a blow for you then."

"You have done so now, to make amends," he said, as he continued: "About a half-hour after you were gone, my friends returned, and, setting me on a horse, we rode off in the direction of Loches. I forgot to say they had removed my gag, and the ropes from my feet, though my hands remained securely tied. Beyond Beaulieu we met the Princess of Condé and her suite on the way to Orleans."

"What!" exclaimed Marcilly and I in a breath.

"Eh!" said Ponthieu, "you seem surprised, but it is as I said."

"*Souvent femme varie,*" muttered Jean, under his breath, as I hastened to ask.

"Are you sure, Ponthieu?"

"Sure as I live! It was near the King's Oak, where the road through the forest turns sharply towards the west. My guards thought me safe enough, for Loches was in sight. Two of them were a little in front of me laughing and singing, two rode behind, and in this manner we were going at a walk, when at the elbow of the road, we came face to face with a half-dozen cavaliers, and the leading horseman was Coqueville.

"All through the morning I had been looking for some chance to make a dash for it. When we met, the two parties were not fifty yards apart, and if I could only slip past them, I knew that in the confusion I would get a start, and the luck that favours the brave might favour me.

"All this went through me in a moment. I put spurs to my horse, and, giving a yell, went forwards like a flash. I got behind Coqueville, calling loudly out to him by name for help, and then my horse stumbled, and I rolled over like a log into the brambles.

"But the good God was with me. I was not hurt, by a mercy. Coqueville knew my voice, and, *ma foi!* but he is a great sword. Whilst I lay in the brambles I heard the kicking and plunging of horses, the clash of steel, and twice the sharp reports of a pistol. My guards were taken by surprise, but the bishop is well served, and they made a brave fight of it. Two lay dead in the snow, and two, beaten from their horses, had surrendered. I thought it was time to appear now, so scrambled up, and began to pour out thanks, whilst the cords that bound my hands were cut by a Moorish dwarf."

"Majolais!"

"I know not his name, but, once free, I helped myself to a sword from one of the dead men, and explained how I stood. The Princess was there in her litter, and she herself told me that she was for Orleans, but that Monsieur de Lanoy had taken the young Prince on to Poitou. She wished me God-speed on my errand to the Constable, Coqueville gave me one of the captured horses, and lent me ten écus —and you can guess the rest. But now, messieurs, here is the forest of Russy, and here is the Beuvron, and here we must part, for I lie to-night at Bracieux, and to-morrow must be with the Constable."

He shook our hands, thanked us again, and, turning towards the north-east, trotted off into the forest.

CHAPTER X.

THE VISION OF THE WOOD.

WE had reined up under a huge yoke-elm, whose spreading branches threw a mottled shade on the snow at our feet, and watched Ponthieu in silence until he went quite out of our sight. The same thoughts were running in our minds. Perhaps something too of the same despair had seized us, a presentiment that we were casting away our lives for nothing. Madame de Condé had at one stroke, by changing her plans, gone straight into the lion's mouth, and had increased tenfold the difficulty of our emprise, if not totally destroying all chances of its success. And yet, now that I look back upon things, I cannot blame her. She was a woman, after all, and guided more by the heart than the head. But then, as we stood there, I railed against the caprice that was like to cost us all our lives.

"Did ever you hear the like?" I burst out, and Marcilly laughed bitterly as he answered:—

"We go like lambs to the slaughter, perchance," and then he looked me straight in the face, saying:—

"Gaspard! You see that track! It leads straight to the high road to Blois. Turn rein and ride there, and thence take horse to Poitou. There is blood in the air, friend, but it must not be yours. Leave me! I will do this alone."

"Monsieur," I said, a flush rising to my face, and, as God is my witness, the words I uttered came straight from my heart, "Monsieur, I have the honour to be joined with you in this thing, and I stay with you till the last, for good or ill."

"Think!" he said, "and draw back whilst there is time. Where are Renaudie, Castelnau and Ste. Marie? Where are a hundred brave hearts we knew and loved?"

"Where we shall be if we fail. I will not go."

"Your lands are broad, Vibrac. You are young, and life is dear."

"My life is my own, and neither my lands nor yours of Duras were won with dishonour. And for the risk—I—I but stake myself, whilst you ——"

I said no more, for he knew what I meant, and his brown cheek paled. As for me, for that moment I was innocent, I had conquered the past, and for once the dread breath that stirred the fires of evil within me lost its malign power. The whispering presence was there, ready as ever, but I was strong then. Would that that strength had continued! Ah! God in Heaven! why dost Thou not stoop a little lower to help Thy creatures? And now I put aside the fiend with a curse, and swore again and again that I would die with Marcilly if need be, and we clasped hands once more on my oath, as we rode through the twilight of the woods of Russy, through the red sunset that lit up the old and gnarled trunks, and bronzed the tracery of branches overhead; a strange glow, that flushed the snow beneath us, that ran on the crests of the trees in a line of flame, and, falling on the grey of the distant woodlands, lit them with its glory, to sink at last in a trembling veil of empurpled shadows.

What thoughts stirred Marcilly I know not; but as I rode behind him I was once more fighting with myself. I saw with horror that the past was still awake within me, and there was a black foreboding in my soul of evil to come. Again I clutched at the strength above me, again bent my head in silent prayer. I swore to myself that I would put to flight the hideous phantom that dogged me, and once more there came to me that momentary strength, that feeble power that faints so weakly at the first stealthy footfall of temptation.

Were other men like me, I wondered, or was I accursed beyond my fellows, one marked with the Mark of the Beast?

Good would it have been if I had taken Jean's offer, and turned rein to Blois. The bitter days that were to come had then perchance never been; but my word was passed, and I would not draw back for dread of my life. It would be said that Gaspard de Vibrac had feared to die with his friend, that he had fled like a frighted roe at the first rustle of the leaves. It would be no longer the Fever of St. Vallière, but the Sweat of Vibrac that would brand a poltroon with infamy. No! It could not be! And so, against myself, I drifted with the tide into that yawning abyss from which there is no return.

I had once put the past to sleep as I thought. Fool that I was! The past never sleeps. The madness had come on me again, and again I had crushed it, as I imagined, in that lonely struggle with myself, which he, who was a priest of his people, had mocked at and gibed. And was this horror to envelope me again? God forbid! No! A thousand times no! I would play this last game to the end of my sword, and then—farewell to France.

I longed, yet feared, to meet Marie. I felt my bridle hand shiver as I thought of her, and, so thinking, I all unconsciously slackened pace, and dropped behind the others, letting my horse go slower and slower until he barely walked. It was at this moment that I became possessed of an intense feeling that the thoughts of the woman I loved were with me. I involuntarily glanced to my right, and there, as I live, at the edge of the purple shadow, where a lean glade opened and stretched out, long and white, I saw her stand. It was no dream of fancy. No fever of the brain. She stood there, I say, at the fringe of the glade, where the light and darkness joined, with the gold of her hair all shining like a glory. She was looking straight at me, with that in her glance I had never seen before. It was not love nor hate, but an infinite pity that shone in her eyes, and then her lips seemed to move in speech, and—she was gone.

I drew rein at the spot where she stood. It was not ten paces from me. I peered into the quaking shadows, but my glance met nothing except the endless lines of hoary trunks that stretched like pillars along the dim aisles of the forest. Here and there, past the gaps in the boughs that arched overhead, I saw the blood light of the dying sunset shining as through the stained glass of some old minster window, a light that made the darkness yet more dark, and flung strange, awesome shadows on the still scene upon which it shone.

"Marie!" I called out in a low voice, "Marie!"

But there was no answer except the mockery of the echoes. "Marie—Marie!" they gibed from behind the haggard trees. "Marie—Marie!" they whispered from the wan branches. The very air was full of her name.

I turned, sick at heart, from those voices that spoke to me of her.

Echoes — not they? They were the long-dead people of the wood come back in that shivering twilight — sprite and elf and goblin — and they had fashioned of their cunning a phantom to make me a plaything and a sport.

Slowly I pushed my horse a little way into the wood, my eyes here, there and everywhere. The dry undergrowth snapped and crackled beneath his hoofs, and from a bent and twisted bough overhead a huge owl, startled by the sound, fled with flapping wings, and a dismal hoot, into the deep of the forest.

I had totally forgotten my companions. In the nervous state to which I was reduced, I know not how far I might have gone on, but now I heard my name called out again and again, as Marcilly and Badehorn galloped back to seek me, and, brought to the moment by their shouts, I came out and joined them.

"*Cap de Diou!*" exclaimed Jean, "as our friend Ponthieu would say. This is no season for woodland flowers, Gaspard, nor are we here to gather posies for our sweethearts. Have you a mind to spend the night in Russy woods?"

A sharp answer rose to my tongue; but checking myself I forced a laugh, and we rode on together, until we at length reached the park gates of Nanteuil, and found a hospitable welcome in the house of Monsieur de Villequier.

There, as we sat round the log fire, sipping the old Vouvray, and listening to Villequier's tales—monsieur was a veteran of Pavia and Cérisoles—we all unconsciously threw off our gloom, and Villequier seemed to slip back into the past years; his cheeks flushed, and his eyes glowed as he recalled his youth, and so the talk drifted on until it struck midnight from the bells of the Antwerp clock in the hall, and we retired to rest; and as I lay down, all wearied to sleep, I could not help thinking of the strong old age of our host, who was descending as full of honours as of years to his grave, and I wondered if the future would bring me the same when I had played my part—wondered and hoped.

That night I slept the sleep of the weary in body and in mind, the sleep, deep and dreamless, in which the hours pass like minutes, and it is light and morning almost, as it seems, in a moment. Strange as it may appear, no thought of the vision I had seen troubled me, nor did it appear again, and I woke with the sun, refreshed and cooler in brain than I had been for long, and laughed and jested gaily as we rode in the winter sunlight, through the glistening woods on our way to Orleans.

Marcilly, too, seemed to have shaken off his sadness, or caught the infection of gaiety from me, and we gave way to the moment without a thought that in a few hours we would be but a finger's distance from the rack and the headsman's block.

I am not going to tell of how we rode through the wintry Orléanais. How we swam the Cosson, and galloped all wet and dripping to the Ardoux. How we dried our clothes and broke our fast at the Three Stags, opposite Our Lady of Cléry, where, in the chapel, those who care may see the lonely grave of Louis XI. of France, that King whose *tisane* was stronger than strong wine, whose laughter was worse than his frown, and who, small, deformed, and mean-looking as a tailor of the Rue St. Antoine, could make his proudest nobles shiver at a look.

All these things and more may rest, for they are foreign to my story.

At length, splashed with the mud and snow of the road, we passed the Loiret, and saw before us the Faubourg St. Marceau, and beyond, on the opposite bank of the Loire, the confused mass of pointed gables and sloping roofs, square towers and slender campaniles that showed where Orleans lay. Before us, on the left, rose high the Abbey Church of Notre

Dame de Recouvrance; higher still, though looking smaller because of the distance, stood the tall spire and the twin towers of Ste. Croix; whilst overhead a mass of grey and white clouds hung in the lazy air, and cast their quivering shadows on the City of the Maid.

Our pulses quickened as we trotted through the Rue Dauphine to the Quai des Augustins, and Marcilly, as he passed the Tudette, pointed to the spire of Notre Dame standing out high to view, and said:—

"An omen of success! Our Lady of the Recouvrance looks at us," and he crossed himself, for he was of the Popish faith. And I wondered in my heart how man could turn to this saint and to that, to relic and graven image, when the very Godhead Himself seemed to hold His face from the creatures He had made.

As we approached the Augustins, we could see that the city was garrisoned as if expecting a siege. Everywhere there were guards of soldiery, for the most part foreigners, and it was noticeable that four out of five of the armed groups bore the arms and wore the colours of the Guise.

"They seem Guisards to a man, Jean," I remarked.

"Yes," he answered, "and if we do not succeed we shall have the eagle on our crown-pieces."

"There are two strings to our bow, however—Ponthieu has got off safely with his letter."

"True! But will Anne de Montmorenci move? He has, it is said, a thousand lances at his back; but the Guise can lay down three for every one of his."

"Then you put little faith in the Admiral's letter?"

"Yes. If the Constable could have moved he would have done so before. He is not strong enough, and it is well known that the first Christian baron plays well for his own hand. He will wait, and join the winning side—mark my words!"

As he said this we reached the quay, and whilst Badehorn hailed a barge, Marcilly put on his mask, and cocked his hat fiercely on one side of his head, saying, with a laugh: "They know the Prince too well in Orleans for me to appear openly here".

"But masked in full day!" I expostulated.

"I have a rash on my face," he answered; "it will vanish when we see Cipierre, to whom we must go at once. We should be with him in less than an hour. He lives in the Place du Martroi."

"And here is the barge," I said, and, entering it, we were taken slowly across the river.

"There is a large crowd there." I pointed to the opposite bank, where, on the Quai du Châtelet, a good half of the population of Orleans seemed to have assembled, all making in a westerly direction, and swaying backwards and forwards like a wind-stirred field, whilst every now and again, above the murmuring voices that hummed like a thousand hives, a hoarse shout would be raised that was taken up all along the line, to die again as suddenly as it had sprung up.

"It is an expiation," said our boatman, "a Huguenot who refused to bow to Our Lady of Mercy, in the Rue des Tanneurs, and he is to make expiation there on the quay."

"On the quay? That is strange!" I said. "Why not before Ste. Croix, or in the Martroi?"

"Monsieur is evidently a stranger," replied our Charon; "they do not expiate at Ste. Croix, and the Martroi is kept now for the Prince. 'Tis said he dies on the 10th."

From out the blackness of his mask Marcilly glanced at me, and our eyes met for an instant as he asked:—

"And is that known? We, who come from the south, heard that he would not die."

"All the world knows it," replied our man; "the barricades and galleries for the spectators are even now ready in the Martroi, as you will see—but we talk of dangerous things, messieurs, and we have reached the quay. Ah! Thanks! This will buy a brave petticoat for my little Lardille."

PART VI.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CITY OF THE MAID.

In four steps we were on the white, glistening quay, and, mounting our horses, began to edge towards the nearest gate, the Porte Royale, by which we proposed to enter the city. It was a task that was far from easy, unless we wished to ride over the heads of the people, for the small space was more than crowded, and one and all were pushing, struggling and hurrying to be on the scene of the execution in time.

"Ah!" said Marcilly, standing in his stirrups, and from the height of his horse looking over the heads of the people, "it is awful—he dies by the Estrapade."

I followed his glance, and, gazing towards the little enclosure in front of the Rue des Tanneurs, saw the post and chains, and the stack of wood that was to form the pyre.

"The patient has not arrived as yet; but the galleries are full."

"Yes; one can see the dresses of the ladies flashing like a bank of flowers. Hear the crowd bark!"

And as he spoke there was a rush to the palisades, and groans, hoots, cat-calls and a tempest of mob-cries arose as the people were driven back, and beaten into order by the men-at-arms, whilst through the shouts, the cries, the oaths and the screams, one heard ever and again the guttural voice of the reiter, or the snake-like, hissing curse of the Italian free-lance, as, with the butts of their lances, and the heels of their horses, they bore the crowd now this way and now that, and threw something of their own perfect discipline into the chaotic mass.

And as I looked I felt a thrill of horror at the thought of what the unfortunate condemned was to endure ere death would end his agony. The Estrapade—it was the lifting in and out of a slow fire—and death took long to come with this. And all this pain, all this suffering, because, forsooth, the wretched man had not bowed to the graven image of the Virgin and her Child! Truly, a fit sacrifice to One who sent His Son with the message of love and forgiveness to earth!

I thank God I never saw him. He was led to his death by the Quatre Fils, and, poor cobbler though he was, he ended his life like a hero and a saint. But six years later he was avenged, on that day when the gutters of Orleans ran in red puddles, and Lanoy pulled down the towers of Ste. Croix in memory of Etienne Caillaud. That, too, I never saw, for it was six years after my living death.

"Onwards!" said Marcilly, "else we shall be unable to move. Ah! See the cubs of Guise!"

And he pointed with his hand to a small group of riders, for whom the crowd made way with the readiness of fear. In the midst of these were three boys, also mounted, and one, the eldest, was tall, a head taller than his brothers, and, child though he was, bore on his features all the pride of Lorraine. His brothers were laughing as they spoke to each other, but he rode in silence, a trifle in advance, now and then coldly lifting his hand in answer to some salute with the grave courtesy of a little king.

"'Tis the young Joinville and his brothers," Marcilly ran on; "child as he is, he thinks himself Dauphin already."

"As he may be some day."

"Ah!" called out a woman near us, who bore a child in one arm, whilst another of eight or ten years clung to her girdle. "Ah! See the young Princes, Henriquet! It will not be long now; let us hasten."

"One takes long to die by the Estrapade; there will be time," said the man whom she had addressed, a sober-looking person, evidently of the artisan class, who, for one, did not seem to enjoy the prospect of witnessing what was to happen.

"And why not, Maître Echelle? Why not? Has he not sinned against the Holy Ghost, and our Lord the Pope? Ah! He is a wicked man. I hope he will take long to die."

"Have a care, woman!" said Marcilly, whose horse was near her; "have a care of the horse, and learn to be a little more pitiful."

The woman looked up, and, seeing the black mask and the grim, mud-bespattered figure of Marcilly, shrank back as she muttered, " It is an assassin, an assassin for sure, who goes masked even in plain day ".

" Way then," I cut in impatiently, and pressing forwards we drove the crowd before us, but ere we had gone ten yards the shrew had recovered her courage and railed after us with her scolding tongue:—

" Ho! They are traitors, heretics, those three who ride there! See the masked one with the devil's face. Traitors! Heretics! To the fire with them!"

In a moment the crowd gathered round us with menacing faces, and from threats it was clear they would soon come to blows. We were forced to draw our swords, and meant to sell our lives dearly if it came to the push, but the sight of the steel cooled the ardour of the mob a little, and they recoiled, only however to come on again with renewed boldness. It was our last wish to have anything even approaching a scuffle now, but we were dealing with people gone mad with excitement, and it was hard to say what would happen at any moment.

" Name of the devil! " roared Badehorn to a group of a half-dozen or so of Light Horse, in the black and yellow of Guise, " keep off these dogs, else there will be bloodshed."

" That is your affair," answered their leader, an Italian, in his lisping French. " We are not police."

" You will answer for this, though," said I hotly, as I made my horse curvet and kick, for the crowd began to rush in again.

They laughed loudly in reply, and emboldened by this there was another rush, and Badehorn was almost pulled from his saddle. Inch by inch, however, we made our way somehow, taking advantage of every foot of space that was given, and clearing the path by sweeping the flats of our swords to the right and left. But this could not go on for long, and we were scarce a hand-breadth from the most deadly peril when, in a momentary pause, I called out:—

"Fools! Are you mad that you listen to an angry woman and try to hinder us who ride for Her Majesty the Queen-Mother! Way! Way! Else beware the *carcan* and the lash!"

The boldness with which I said this had some effect; the crowd hesitated a little, yet still we were not safe, and they were preparing to launch themselves on us again when a low murmur caught our ears, and arrested those about us, a murmur that increased in volume and intensity, until it became a deep, hoarse roar.

"The patient! The patient! He comes!"

In one moment we were utterly forgotten. In one moment we were safe. In the absorbing interest before them the mob let us drop as an ape drops an empty nutshell, and pressed forward with mad strugglings and fierce yells towards the scaffoldings. Far within the choking, gasping mass some one began to sing that terrible death song, which has rung in the ears of so many martyrs of the faith:—

Au feu! Au feu! C'est leur repère.
Faites en justice! Dieu l'a permis,

and the crowd caught the verse and gave it back, so that shout and scream died away; but in their room swelled the pitiless chorus, as the multitude marched to the lilt of the tune, forming in line, as it were, of their own accord, and beating time to the measure with their feet as they rolled along the long quay in an endless column.

Men, women and children in that vast assemblage had all gone mad. They marched arm-in-arm singing their dolorous hymn, some with white faces, others with bloodshot cheeks; but one and all with eager eyes straining before them, and one and all drunk with the wild music of their chant.

In the distance I saw our artisan, he who I thought had something of pity in his heart; but he too had caught the nameless infection, and with head thrown back and staring eyes was singing with the rest, whilst at his side marched his wife, and her shrill, hard voice rose piercing and high:—

Au feu! Au feu! C'est leur repère!

"*C'est leur repère!*" bellowed the echoing mob, as it swung past us to see a martyr die.

We waited to see no more. Our hearts were already sick enough, and, seizing the opportunity given to us, passed through the gates, and took our way to the house of Cipierre, over the uneven and still slippery cobble stones of the ill-paved Rue Royale.

"If I live a hundred years I shall never forget to-day," said Marcilly, as we rode together side by side. "And yet we have actually seen nothing. Still, I agree with you. I have never felt the horror that I felt to-day."

"It is, I think, what we have not seen which affects us."

And then perhaps the same thought came to us both, and we lapsed into silence.

For the moment we might have been riding through a city of the dead. Here in the Rue Royale there was not a soul to be seen. All the shops were shut, every door was barred, and the stones of the pavement echoed dismally to the hoofs of our horses. On either side of the narrow street, the gutters, full of melted snow and mud, bubbled angrily past, and here and there, where the mouth of some blind alley, or cut-throat lane, opened out and yawned at us, the wind came bustling through, blowing damp and chill as the cavernous deeps from which it came. On each hand the houses, old as the days of La Pucelle, raised their walls, leprous with mottlings of purple, grey, brown and white, in storey after storey above us, so that but a thin slit of sky was visible between the pentice roofs, that seemed to totter towards each other; whilst from out of the dappled surface of the walls, round projecting windows and crenellated balconies thrust themselves, forming a shelter over the uneven footways that clung to the edges of the road.

Now and again we caught a glimpse of the stray figure of a woman or a child, standing at a window or leaning out of a balcony, and looking at us with an eager curiosity, and once one called down to us:—

"Is it over? Did he suffer much? Did he speak?"

To all these questions, which were asked in a breath, Badehorn replied for us with an expressive shake of his head, and as he did so we reached the Rue Jeanne d'Arc, which broke in here upon the Rue Royale, and, making a half-turn to the right, as we reined in to observe the view for a moment, we found ourselves facing Ste. Croix. A little to our left, above the confused mass of red and grey roofs, rose the wings of the royal palace, now dark with the shadow of a passing cloud, whilst beyond, above the battlements of the main tower, and half in shadow and half in light, fluttered the royal standard of France, and now and again through the bays of the windows, or past the embrasures, we caught the gleam of a pike or the flash of a lance. To our right, frowning over the Capuchin Convent, we could see the grim mass of the Hôtel de Ville, and before us, as I have said, at the end of a broad, straight road, stood the huge façade of Ste. Croix, all glistening in the sunlight, as if the very clouds would not shadow that great temple of the Lord.

Even as we stood there the chime of the vesper bells began, but above their mellow note the freshening breeze blowing from the west bore us a faint cadence from afar; the mob was singing yet around the dying victim of bigotry and superstition.

"*Mon Dieu!*" I burst out, "that devil's hymn will follow us for ever;" and we waited no more, but turned again and trotted over the few yards that separated us from the Place du Martroi.

Here there were still a few people gathered around a scaffold that had been erected in the centre of the square. Around this scaffold was a palisade, and beyond the palisade men were busily at work giving the finishing touches to the wooden galleries that would overlook the coming scene. As we came into the square the block was being placed on the platform, and a short, broadly-built man, dressed in black, with a black mask on his face, was superintending the operation.

Marcilly and I exchanged glances, but Badehorn for once began to speak.

"Ah, messieurs! It is Monsieur of Paris himself. I saw him last when the Comte de Ste. Marie died at Amboise."

"It appears, then, that Monsieur of Paris has an assistant as well," said a voice which appeared to spring from the ground, as it broke in upon Badehorn's speech. Looking to my side with a start, I saw a small man dressed in a suit of orange and green satin. A short cloak of the same gay colours hung from his shoulders, whilst his sceptre, crowned with the head of an ass in gold, and his cap and bells showed his calling.

He was staring at Marcilly with his little eyes that flashed and twinkled, from a face as long and sharp as that of a polecat, whilst his lips, parted in a smile, showed two rows of strong white teeth. He had apparently come out from behind the boardings of one of the galleries, and now stood right in our path swinging his sceptre backwards and forwards, with his eyes fixed on Marcilly's mask. His meaning was obvious, and Jean angrily raised his whip; but the jester skipped back nimbly, and vanished behind the shelter of his boardings with an elfish laugh.

"That mask is like to bring you more trouble than profit," I remarked.

"It has served its purpose, however," said he as he slipped it off and thrust it under the flap of his holster. "Think you what would have happened if the crowd had raised a shout of 'Condé!' in that mood. It was better after all to risk the gibes of that jester—confound him—I wonder whose he was?"

"It matters not. Perhaps he belongs to the Court; but surely you do not mean to continue to wear the mask whilst you are in Orleans?"

"Not after we are under the wing of the Queen-Mother; but here is Cipierre's house at last."

As he said this we reined up before the gates of a house, at the corner of a square, overlooking the Rue de la Hallebarde. The house itself stood a little way back from the square, from which it was separated by a courtyard, bounded by a high, spiked wall, in the centre of which was a huge iron-studded gate, flanked on each side by two squat towers with a gallery between, on the face of which, and immediately above the door, was the blazon of Cipierre.

The gate was shut, but opened at once to our knock, discovering the flagged court, the wide stairway that led to the house door, and the figures of one or two armed men lounging in the enclosure.

The porter, an old man, bent and white-headed, recognised Marcilly at once.

"Monsieur le Comte!" he exclaimed, astonishment and delight lighting his dim eyes, for he had known Jean since he was a child.

"Yes, I in flesh and blood, Bobêche! And is the Vicomte in?"

"Monsieur le Vicomte has gone to the expiation, and sups after with Monsieur de Sancerre."

"I might have expected something like this," muttered Marcilly to himself, then, raising his voice, "Monsieur de Vibrac and I will wait, Bobêche."

"Assuredly, monsieur. The house is yours, as you know. Ah! But the return of monsieur will gladden madame's eyes. She was here but yesterday. But messieurs are travel-stained and weary, and that *coquin* of a steward and every soul in the place has gone sight-seeing, except Jacques, monsieur's valet, who is as old as myself, and these three Switzers. Jacques, *mon ami*, here are Monsieur le Comte and his friend, who have travelled far. Attend then quickly to the gentlemen."

"One moment," I said. "Had you not better send to warn Cipierre of our arrival?"

"Ah! I woolgather. Of course!" and taking out a pocket-book, and tearing a leaf therefrom, Jean scribbled a few lines, and, folding it carefully, handed it to one of the Swiss.

"For Monsieur le Comte," I said, in his own tongue, for I had served in the Trans-Alpine Infantry. "It is urgent, and here is a crown to quicken your footsteps."

The man saluted, pocketed the money, and withdrew. We then consigned ourselves to the hospitable care of Jacques, and an hour later Jean and myself met in the great hall, refreshed by our bath and change of toilet, and looking like different men. Jacques offered us wine, but, though we sipped a little, we were both of us beginning to feel that we had come to the edge of the precipice, and put down our cups practically full.

"Madame de Marcilly was here yesterday, I understand?" said Marcilly to Jacques.

"Monsieur, with Mademoiselle de Beauce."

"Thanks! That will do," and then Jean walked to the window and stared out across the square in the direction of the palace, whilst I stood at the fireplace, my foot on a dog's head of the fender, and our hearts were both with the same woman.

He came back to me at last, and flung himself in a chair, still looking before him with a grey sadness in his eyes, as he said low to himself:—

"Poor Marie!"

In my confidence I felt I was victor over myself: but the words rasped me somehow, and I moved impatiently from my position.

"You are getting the blues, Jean. 'Tis this city of horrors into which we have come. Rouse yourself, man! We are on the threshold now."

"Yes, on the threshold—of what?" he asked, but still as if speaking to himself. "We are on the threshold, and the door will open soon—but where will it lead? We are giving our lands, our wealth, our lives, all that we hold dear, for a dream—and life is dear to me, Gaspard, not so much for its own sake, but for the sake of her who loves me."

"We should have thought of that before, and there is still time to draw back." There was a bitterness in my tone I could not conceal, and a faint flush reddened his cheeks.

"You are right to spur me," he said, as he drained his cup, and rose to his feet, "and here comes our messenger."

The Switzer came in with his heavy stride, and saluting, stood dumbly before us.

"You have given the letter?" I asked.

"Excellency."

"And the answer—any?"

The man drew from his pocket a tablet, and handed it to me. I passed it on to Jean, who attempted to read it, but in vain.

"*Diable!* He may have written this with the point of his dagger. Can you make it out?"

We did, with some difficulty, and the words of the note, written in a huge, sprawling hand, ran as follows:—

> "Welcome. Sancerre bids me say he expects you and De Vibrac to join us at supper at seven. Come.
>
> "CIPIERRE."

"The door is opening," I said, with a forced gaiety; "we must go."

"And it wants but a half-hour," answered Jean, as he pointed to the clock.

CHAPTER XII.

"GENTLEMEN! I AM WITH YOU."

As the last trembling notes of the vesper bells died away, the gates of Cipierre's house opened, and Marcilly and myself, accompanied by one of the Swiss, rode out into the square. We had judged it wise to take a man in Cipierre's colours with us, as, in case of any accident, the fact of our being accompanied by one of the guards of the Governor of Orleans might prove of advantage. Marcilly had resumed his mask. This now would not attract the attention it had done in full day, for it was a common enough custom to wear such a thing after sunset, as a protection against the inclemency of the night air.

"Are Cipierre and Sancerre to be let into our confidence?" I said in Spanish, to avoid any chance of the Swiss understanding our converse.

"I have been thinking of that a good deal," Marcilly replied, "and it will all depend upon how far they are willing to go. Sancerre is ready enough to move, I believe—Maligny was strong in insisting on that. As for Cipierre, he may think himself bound by his office as Captain of Orleans not to do anything."

"In that case we are leaning on a very doubtful support if we trust to Cipierre to get us access to the palace to-night."

"Not so. He will do that much. He hates the Guise, and, rough soldier as he is, he loves me well. There may be a little difficulty, and I may have to use some of the diplomacy I learned in the Spanish Embassy; but we will get our interview with Catherine. Once arouse their enthusiasm, and they will be with us for good and all. Courage! We have little to fear on that score."

We were in the Hallebarde at the time of this conversation, and the contrast between the state of the streets on our entry into the town and now, was marked. The expiation was over, and the Loire was carrying down its sluggish current the ashes of the unfortunate victim of a ferocious bigotry. Orleans had returned to its hive, but still the excitement of the awful scene had not passed. The Hallebarde was full, and the shops had reopened, even for the short time that lay between this and the hour, nine o'clock, by which, under the edict, all lights were to be extinguished.

The street itself was dim, lit only by stray lanterns, hanging at long intervals on ropes that ran across from house to house, but the pavement was awake to the tramp of passing feet, and men and women flitted before us like grey shadows, or stood out in bold silhouette against the lights from the doors of a cabaret, or the windows of a shop or may-be dwelling-house. Every now and again a group of lackeys, with drawn swords and lighted torches, would pass us, escorting the litter of some Court lady or priest of rank, and almost at every hundred paces we met a party of mounted men, who went by us with a clattering of arms, and a flashing of steel, whilst above the insistent hum of voices we often caught a word or phrase that told us what was the one subject of conversation. They were full of what had happened, and of what was to be.

It was, however, in the Rue du Tabourg that a thing occurred that seemed to be an omen of success. We were at the spot where the Cheval Rouge crosses the Tabourg, and were for a moment arrested by a crowd gathered around the entrance to an ordinary, and extending from the door itself almost across the street. As we came up we heard a voice cry out loudly: "Imbeciles! Wait till the 10th. The expiation of our Caillaud will be nothing to that. We will see something on the 10th!" And the speaker, a tall, thin man, with projecting teeth and a wrinkled face, stood in the full glare of the light, swinging his arms over his head.

"And what will we see?" questioned a voice from the crowd.

The tall man looked around him, and into the darkness. He was about to say something, but the people answered for him:—

"The Prince! The Prince dies on the 10th!"

"The Prince will not die," answered the voice, and this time I saw as well as heard the speaker. He was on my left, in the shadow of the wall, between my horse and the door of the cabaret, and he was the jester of the Place de Martroi.

"How? Why?" exclaimed a dozen voices; but with his odd laugh the jester slipped back, and mingled with the shadow. He seemed, so suddenly did he vanish from my sight, to have melted into air.

We pushed through the crowd, who were asking each other eager questions as to who had answered the tall man in so strange a manner, and as we got clear of them Marcilly remarked:—

"The laugh I heard reminded me much of the jester we met in the Martroi."

"It was he," I answered; "I saw him distinctly. He was close to my nag's head. You heard what he said?"

"That the Prince would not die on the 10th."

"Yes."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"What can I think? If the fool belongs to the Court, he may have heard some gossip, and took the opportunity to repeat what he knew. If, on the other hand, it is one of those vain winds that whistle through the head of folly ——"

"Excellencies, we stop here," said the Swiss; "this is the Comte de Sancerre's house."

We rode into the courtyard, and, dismounting, gave our horses to the lackeys who came to meet us. As we ascended the stairway, Marcilly remarked:—

"This is the house that Agnes Sorel lived in. It came to Sancerre with his wife, and old De Beuil has lived here since her death. Though of the first nobility, and a faithful servant of the King, he is now never seen in Paris. He went out as the Guise came in."

"I confess I am curious to meet him—the one peer of France, the one knight of the King's Order, who refused in full Council to sign the death-warrant of the Prince."

"Hum! I don't know that the King's Order is much of an honour now, though you and I both hold it. They have given it to every Italian bravo or sneaking Lorrainer that can boast of having a grandfather—truly, Tiercelin said well when he called it the Collar of all the Beasts."

As he spoke we were shown into a small room, where, close to the fireplace, covers were laid for four. There was no one in the room when we entered, and whilst Marcilly sank wearily on to a seat, I leaned against the window, now watching the grey night outside and the dim twinkling of the lamps in the city, then turning my eyes in idle curiosity on the quaint tapestry and old arms with which the walls were hung.

We had not, however, to wait above a few minutes. Then we heard voices in eager converse, the door opened, and Sancerre and the Captain of Orleans entered with a warm welcome and excuses for keeping us waiting. Louis de Beuil, Comte de Sancerre, was at that time nearly seventy years of age. In person he was tall and thin, with a pale face, bright blue eyes, and a white beard that fell half-way down his chest. He was dressed in black, and walked with a slight stoop. Cipierre, on the other hand, though he counted as many years as Sancerre, was in marked contrast to him. I can picture him now standing before me, a grey old wolf, with his square jaw, short, bristling moustache and closely cut beard.

"Monsieur de Vibrac," said Sancerre, as he shook me by the hand, "believe me, I welcome you here; but you come to a city which ought to be in sackcloth."

Cipierre tugged at his moustache, and glanced from Marcilly to me, as he cut in, with a short laugh:—

"Ste. Croix! If I did my duty, nephew, both you and monsieur here ought to be on your way to the Hôtel de Ville. What grasshopper did you get into your head to put yourself into the lion's jaws as you have?"

To tell the truth I began to feel a trifle uncomfortable at this sudden change of manner in the Vicomte, but Jean replied calmly:—

"How, monsieur? You would send us to the Hôtel de Ville, who come to offer our swords to the King? Believe me, they will be more useful than our heads sticking on the spikes of the Porte Royale."

Cipierre laughed once more. "Let me tell you you would be safer in the Hôtel de Ville than out of it."

"With Monsieur Sarlaboux to guard us! My uncle, you are too kind! I little thought that Cipierre would ever serve the Guise."

The shot told, and the brown cheek of the old soldier became brick-red.

"*Mordieu!* I serve the Guise! Since when? If the King, or even Madame Catherine, would but lift a finger, I—yes I, *mordieu!* ——"

Here Sancerre interrupted him, and, placing his hand on Cipierre's shoulder, said with his quiet voice:—

"Steady, old friend! Even our heads are shaking. Be careful lest they fall! Come, messieurs! Let us to supper. The blood runs cold at my age, and I need something to warm it. And you, too, gentlemen, I doubt not, are famished."

For some little time the conversation confined itself to the event of the day, but when at last we were alone with the wine, Sancerre said, with a look at Cipierre:—

"Messieurs, we are alone now, and these walls are deaf, so we can speak freely. Let me tell you that the air of Orleans is unhealthy at present. Take my advice and go with the dawn."

"But, monsieur, we came, as I said, to offer our swords to the King."

"The King," said Cipierre, "will soon need no earthly sword to protect him. He is dying."

"Dying! Is it as bad as that?"

"Yes, Monsieur de Vibrac. It is a matter of days only, I fear, and after that—well, I am an old man, and I have served them for fifty years; but with his death it is an end to the Valois."

"Monsieur, how can that be? There are the other Princes."

"Leaves drop from a dead tree, monsieur."

"And, to compare it with other things, I have known an eagle take a lamb before."

It was Marcilly who spoke, and, at this reference to the crest of Guise, Cipierre swore under his moustache; and I went on with the talk, saying:—

"It appears to me that the eagle must reckon with Bourbon."

"The account is almost made up," said Sancerre; "the ambition of Catherine and the folly of the Constable have played well into the hands of Guise. The Bourbon is a dead legend, unless a miracle were to happen. Navarre is a fool and a sot. Montpensier has been bought with the pears of Touraine, and La Roche-sur-Yonne with the quinces of the Orléanais. There remains only Condé, and his head falls on the 10th. After that, Cipierre, you and I, and all of us, must bend the knee to King Francis the Third."

"Never!" exclaimed Cipierre; "never!" and he struck his open palm on the table. "Why! I remember Claude of Lorraine a mere gentleman of the Court—and his son King! Never!"

"Why should not the miracle happen?" It was Jean who spoke, and our eyes met. His face had paled a little, and the hand which held his goblet shook, but the moment had come. I saw he was about to risk a hazard and waited, unquiet and troubled.

"I do not follow you," said Sancerre, whilst Cipierre turned a questioning eye on his nephew.

"Messieurs," he began, "I and my friends have come here and placed our lives in your hands, not in idle recklessness, but because we have a great work to do. I have said placed our lives in your hands, but from you I know we are safe; and we know, too—

all France knows—that the King has no servants more loyal than De Beuil of Sancerre, and the head of my house. Is it not as I say?"

Neither made reply. Cipierre kept pulling at his moustache, and Sancerre's white forehead wrinkled slightly; but his keen blue eyes said "Go on," and Jean continued:—

"We have just seen that between the Guise and the throne there is but one life to be reckoned with. How it has come to that, you know as well as I do. We have, in short, just discussed it, and it is needless to go over the same ground again. Now, gentlemen, are we to sit still and see Louis of Bourbon die?"

"It is the King's order," said Cipierre drily.

"And that sentence has been confirmed by the Estates of France, to their eternal disgrace," added Sancerre.

"I had thought that five thousand swords would have flashed from their scabbards ere a prince of the blood died at the nod of Guise."

"The flashing is over, monsieur, and the gutters of Amboise still run red. The Guise have won the game, curse them!" said Cipierre.

"On the contrary, there are still a few cards for us," replied Marcilly. He had risen from his chair, and was standing at the table now, the light full on his resolute features.

"My Lords," he went on solemnly, "we all know the issue at stake. We all know, too, that there are times when one or two devoted men have done what was thought to be impossible. Vibrac and I have come to attempt this, and we ask your help. I see before me one in whose veins runs the blood royal of France. I see before me a soldier of the days of Pavia and Cérisoles, the head of my house, whose battle-cry is 'For my Honour and my King!' Do I appeal to them in vain?"

"What can we do?" asked Cipierre. "Are we to open the windows and call out 'A Condé! A Condé!' Think you that the town will rise? Guise is Lieutenant-General of the kingdom. He has two thousand lances at his back. He holds the King and Madame Catherine in the hollow of his hand. No, the wine is drawn, messieurs, and there is nothing left but the drinking."

"Then, my lords, you appear to think that we must stand still and look on whilst Guise makes his last stroke! That we, Frenchmen, should sit in our balconies, whilst the Lorrainers keep our streets! You risk nothing by joining us. In any case, if Guise wins, it is ruin, if not death, to us all. Let me tell you one thing more. It is possible that the Constable may move at once, and the Admiral is already raising Poitou; yet again, Catherine is now with us, and another still—the Queen herself!"

"Mary of Scotland—the niece of Guise!" exclaimed Cipierre, whilst Sancerre smiled quietly as he said: "You are well informed, Marcilly."

"You see," continued Marcilly, taking no note of the interruptions, "that we still have some cards, and if we can save the Prince, the Guise lose their game totally. Vibrac and I are here to do that, and, my lords, we seek but your aid to see the Queen-Mother and the King to-night, for there is no time to lose."

He resumed his seat, and for the moment there was a silence. Cipierre toyed with his glass, and Sancerre leaned back, stroking his beard. All at once he rose, with a smile on his face, and, turning towards the Vicomte, said:—

"Cipierre, old friend, will I tell you what we are going to do? We now go to take these two gentlemen to the palace. We now go to bear two good swords to the King. We now go to awake my friend. We have been asleep. We would be traitors to our blood and our honour if we refused our help, and if the worst comes to the worst we are both old enough to have learned how to die. Gentlemen, I am with you," and he turned to us, "give me your hands."

"*Mordieu!*" burst out Cipierre, "and mine too—come what may!"

PART VII.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW SIGNOR BENTIVOGLIO BURNED HIS ALOES.

MARCILLY was right when he said that if we once succeeded in enlisting the good wishes of Sancerre and his uncle, they would act for us with full hearts. He knew them better than I did, who had forebodings as to the result of his plan; but through the information he had received from Maligny, and, above all, from Marie, he was enabled to gauge the situation correctly, and he had brought home the fact that both Cipierre and Sancerre were doomed men in the case of the death of Condé. Events had so worked at that time that this would leave the Guise without a rival in France, and they would certainly not hesitate to take their toll of vengeance from the Vicomte, whose hatred to their house was known; and still less would they stay their hands against Sancerre, whose flat refusal to aid in the sham trial had so nearly scattered all the fine-spun schemes of Lorraine.

Whilst we were buckling on our swords, and awaiting the horses, Cipierre bluntly asked his nephew:—

"And what is your plan, Marcilly? You have not told us that."

Jean was about to answer, when Sancerre cut in with a laugh:—

"*Tudieu!* My dear Vicomte, it is not necessary for us to know as yet. Our business is to smooth the way for these gentlemen at the palace, and to see that a stout horse or two is ready if wanted."

"But to work in the dark ——"

"Exactly! We will take a lesson from the mole, and work in the dark for the present. The light will come to us later on. Now we do not need it. And more, it has gone compline, and we must hasten. Here are the horses! Come, gentlemen!"

Cipierre shrugged his shoulders, and finished his wine as the old Count fastened the clasp of his cloak and led the way downstairs, where we found the horses ready and the light from the torches shining in scales of fire on the cuirasses of the Governor's guard.

"To the palace," said Cipierre, "by the Bourgogne!"

And filing out of the narrow gate, a few steps brought us to the Rue Royale, across which we found the Bourgogne.

Sancerre rode between Marcilly and myself, Cipierre a little ahead, sitting squarely on his Picard horse, and grimly silent.

"One great difficulty we have to deal with," said Marcilly, "is the coming of the Princess to Orleans."

"*Mon Dieu!* You do not mean to say she is coming? Why, it is worse than folly!"

"It is madness," replied Jean.

"I see," said Sancerre; "the madness of a woman who loves. Ah! If we had but a little time!"

What answer Marcilly would have made I know not; but now we came to the turning to the left which led into the Rue Parisis, and Cipierre, suddenly reining back, pointed to a house, which raised its solidly built wall high over the others in the little square, saying in a low voice:—

"There!"

Nothing more was wanted to tell us we were before Condé's prison. Not a ray of light gleamed from the sullen walls, which looked down upon us with a chill blankness. The upper half of the building was in grey darkness, but there was an orange glow on the lower half, that reached to the crenellated balcony, caused by a huge fire that burned in the courtyard; and by the glare of this we saw four pieces of artillery grinning over the towers of the gate.

"You should know those, Jean," Cipierre went on, "they are 'the Emperor's Pistols'."

Marcilly laughed a little bitterly. "They are doing now for Guise what they never did for the Emperor," he answered, as we rode on, crossing the Grands Ciseaux, over the broad, flat stones of the parvis of Ste. Croix, which stood a huge, shadowy phantom to our right, and halted at last before the palace gates.

As we walked across the flagged courtyard my sleep of thought awoke once more within me. I forgot in a moment our perilous enterprise. All that was present in my mind was that I was near Marie, that I would see her once again whom I loved.

No chain of lightning links itself so quickly together as one's thoughts. In a flash I reviewed the whole matter again, and bargained with myself. I would see her, perhaps speak to her; but it would be for the last time, and I would carry that dear memory away with me to the distant land I meant to seek if I escaped the dangers before me.

I caught myself actually peering into the knots of the archers of the Scots Guards to see if she was there, and then laughed at my folly, only to look again at the next group I saw with the same expectancy. Every figure, every voice, every shadow in the long galleries, or behind the glazing of the windows, seemed to take her shape and form.

There are those who may read these lines and smile at the fool and his folly. They are fortunate in not having passed through what I did. Let them examine their own hearts, however, and smile, if they can yet smile, then. Those hearts may be harder, more steeled than mine, but I swear that in their silent prisons lie secrets that should still the jeer and silence the gibe.

For me, I am hiding nothing, concealing nothing. It is part of my punishment to lay bare the working of those influences which led me, one by one, to be what I am—a man of regrets.

Strange! With every thought of the woman I loved there began to stir again within me that bitterness towards Marcilly I have spoken of before. It was the bitterness one feels towards the man whom one has wronged. In the wave of good impulse that had swept over me, I thought this evil fire had been extinguished; but here it was again, burning slowly and surely. And yet I was his brother, sworn to stand by him to the end. There were times when I felt strong, when my very heart was with him; but when these memories cropped up, I had to force myself to the right, drag myself like an unwilling dog at the end of a chain.

It was with these mingled feelings in my heart that I walked up the gallery that led to Catherine's apartments. Cipierre was by my side, and a yard or so before us were Marcilly and Sancerre, conversing in low, rapid tones. Sancerre was getting that confidence he had prevented Cipierre from obtaining ere we started.

The corridor was in semi-darkness, being lit by cressets placed at some distance apart, which threw a feeble light around them, casting grotesque shadows on the polished oak of the floor, and the heavy tapestry that clung to the walls.

At the extreme end, opposite to us, the light was brighter; and, facing us, at the side of the door, young Lorgnac, the lieutenant of the Queen's Guard, was seated on a coffer, his drawn sword resting between his knees.

When we were half-way up the corridor, the door near which Lorgnac was seated opened, and a man stepped out, closing it quickly behind him.

The lieutenant half rose, but the stranger stayed him with a laugh and a wave of his hand. Then, with a hurried word in Lorgnac's ear, he turned and came towards us with quick, firm steps. He was splashed with mud, his corselet was seamed and scarred with lines of fresh rust, and the long red plume in his hat hung limply down. He looked as one who had ridden far and hard, and he came towards us with an indescribable swagger, his sword in the loop of his arm, and clinking the rowels of his huge spurs.

"'Tis Richelieu!" said Sancerre; and Marcilly, who had stepped back to my side on seeing him, pressed my arm as he whispered:—

"My friend of the forest of Châtillon."

We thought he would have come right up to us, and Jean stepped as far into the shadow as possible, but we were mistaken. Whistling low to himself, Richelieu stopped before a side door. It opened to his touch, and with a quick glance at us he was gone.

"So 'The Monk' is back," said Sancerre, using the nickname by which this formidable soldier was known, for he had once held orders. "The Carabiniers have been without their captain for a week."

"Some devil's errand," grumbled Cipierre; "never did Antony de Richelieu look so but there was evil afoot."

"I could throw a little light on that, I fancy, if there was time," said Marcilly, and as he spoke we came to the door of the ante-chamber. Lorgnac had risen to his feet and saluted.

"Is Her Majesty alone, Lorgnac?" asked Cipierre.

"I relieved De Billy but a moment ago, and since I came no one has passed in or out, Monsieur le Vicomte, except Richelieu," replied the young soldier;

"but there are doors within doors behind me, and I cannot say. The Italian is within, however, and he may be able to inform you."

"Bentivoglio?"

Lorgnac nodded, and stepped aside to let us pass.

The door shut behind us as noiselessly as it had opened, and we found ourselves in a room lit by tall wax candles, standing in grotesque holders of bronze. On one side was a recess formed by the bay of a window, and facing us was a heavy curtain of violet velvet, starred with the golden lilies of France. A rare tapestry, representing the deeds of La Pucelle, hung on the walls, and the floor was covered with a matchless carpet, soft and springy as turf. It was one of the gifts brought back by the Embassy to the Grand Turk. Except for a seat or two, the room was entirely bare of furniture, and at first I thought there was no one in it but ourselves. Another glance, however, showed me the figure of a man with his face partly turned from us. He was standing in the half-light of the recess, holding something over a cresset that hung from its domed roof. He dropped this into the dim flame of the lamp, and, a moment after, the pungent odour of burning aloes filled the room. He did not at first appear to observe us, but the clink of our spurs, or may-be scabbards, arrested his attention, and with a slight start he looked up, and then moved towards us. The collar of the Order was round his neck, the golden shells gleaming against his black velvet pourpoint.

It was Cornelius Bentivoglio, Catherine's chamberlain, and as I saw him advancing, a set smile on his dark features, I thought of that wintertide in Roche Guyon when Francis of Bourbon was foully murdered by the man who stood smiling before us. I was a boy then, but the story came to us in the far off Ruergue, and how, too, the bravo had boasted that he had avenged the day of Cérisoles. And now he was a Knight of the King's Order and a noble of the State. In after times we who had also been of the Court knew him well, and I hated and despised him then. I might hate his memory still, but I dare not despise.

"Messieurs!" he said, addressing Sancerre and the Vicomte, and speaking with a strong foreign accent, but in good French, "you are welcome. I was just burning a sprig of aloe. 'Tis a specific against the plague, as René will have it, and smells almost as sweetly as a burning Huguenot. *Per Bacco!* I did not observe you before, messieurs! 'Tis the Comte de Marcilly, and the Sieur de Vibrac, as I live! You have been absent long, gentlemen," and he showed his white teeth in a treacherous smile.

"Monsieur," said Sancerre coldly, "we have come on an urgent affair—do us the honour to announce the Captain of Orleans and the Comte de Sancerre."

"*Vent'bleu!*" the Italian answered, cutting and lisping his words with an affected air, "it would be an honour for me to do so, but," and he shrugged his shoulders, "Her Majesty will not receive. She has been wearied with the day, and 'tis past compline, and besides," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "Madame is not alone. The Duke and the Cardinal are with her."

"At this hour!"

"Faith of a gentleman! Richelieu came here with red spurs and strange tidings, and they followed on his heels. Perhaps, messieurs, he may have forestalled you," and he grinned maliciously.

Cipierre would have said something, but there came a murmur of voices from behind the curtain, the violet folds slipped softly to one side, and two persons entered the room.

It needed no look at the Golden Fleece on his broad breast—he held the Spanish Order—to recognise the Lieutenant-General of the kingdom. His great height, the livid scar of the spear-wound on his left cheek, his air of imperious command, gave no chance for any error—it was the Guise himself. He stopped short in his passage through the room to exchange a few words with Sancerre and the Vicomte, and then his quick glance penetrating the shadow of the recess into which we had retired, he recognised us, for we had served under him, in the days when he fought for the glory of France, and calling us by name, he greeted us with that princely courtesy which belonged to him alone, and under which he could cloak the deadliest hatred.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you bring back the air of the Spanish war with you. 'Tis like a fresh breeze. Remember, the banner of Guise always has shadow for a good sword."

"Your Highness is most kind," said Marcilly, and I murmured something under my breath, my eyes fixed on the curtain, near which stood another and more sinister figure.

It was the Cardinal of Lorraine. One white hand, upon which flashed the sapphire of a prince of the Church, still held the velvet folds of the curtain, against which the scarlet of his robes stood out in rich contrast. He was tall, almost as tall as his brother, and held himself as proudly. He had the same bold, high features, but the sternness on Guise's lip became cruelty on his, the fire of undaunted courage in the Duke's glance, for he was brave among the brave, gave place in the churchman to the malign fire that blazes in the eyes of a wolf, and like the wolf he was pitiless and treacherous. He was learned, eloquent and witty, but there were strange tales about him, how he was a craven at heart, how in secret he mocked at religion. There were stories of orgies at Bel Esbat, his stately seat, that might have brought a blush to the cheeks of Borgia. There were whispers of hideous crimes, of fits of bitter repentance, followed by reckless outbursts of shameless sin. Of these I know nothing of the truth, save that the tongue of scandal was busy with his name. All that I can think of now is that, as I saw him there, his searching glance striving to read every thought on the faces of the group before him, it came to me to rid France of the vampire who drank her blood; but the Lord spared him then, to be a scourge to his country for many a long year to come.

So he stood for a moment, and then passed slowly out of the room, taking no more notice of us than if we had been flies; but the Duke still lingered, as if he would discover what our business was, and yet dared not compromise his dignity by asking a direct question. Cipierre answered him in short yeas and nays, and Sancerre fenced with him like the skilful courtier he was, and then His Highness changed the conversation, and repeated his offers of service to us. We respectively declined them for the present, and he said with that high grave air of his:—

"Very well, gentlemen! Let it be as you wish, but forget not that the sauce of a Guise is as good as the sauce of a Prince of the blood."

And then, with the hidden meaning of his words in our ears, he left us, tall, and stately, a soldier whom we would have followed to the death; but that his sword was red to the hilt with the blood of his country.

"*Diavolo!*" said the chamberlain, "monseigneur is in one of his gracious moods—he meditates a blow."

As he spoke, Cipierre looked him full in the face, saying:—

"Monsieur—if you please."

There was something in the Vicomte's tone that could not be denied, and without an answer the Italian passed into the Cabinet. He came out again almost at once, saying:—

"Her Majesty will receive you, gentlemen."

Then he turned on his heel, and betook himself to burning his aloes once more.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WIDOW OF FRANCE.

IT was a small room, the curtains at the windows were drawn, and a fire burned brightly in the grate. On the polished oak of the floor, black with age, were scattered rare eastern carpets, low, cushioned seats, carved tables and cabinets, holding those delicate and elegant trifles a woman loves—strange carvings, crystals of Venice, rare articles of *faïence*, caskets, and vases wrought in quaint designs.

On the writing-table a winged Mercury, the work of Benvenuto Cellini, held a lamp which filled the room with its amber light. Near the window was a clavichord, and hard by it was a lute left carelessly on a stool, whilst Nambu, the Queen's Barbary ape, slept profoundly on the yellow satin cushions covering the window-seat. Here and there were a few books. An illuminated breviary in a golden case, with the arms of France set in brilliants thereon, lay on a *prie-Dieu* made from the wood of the gates of the Holy Sepulchre. Beside this was carelessly flung a fan of marabout feathers, a vinaigrette and a pair of gloves, whilst against the wall, overhanging these things, was a large golden cross on which a Christ writhed in His last agony.

On the writing-desk, its pages open, was a volume of *The Prince*, by Machiavel the Florentine. In a cabinet near were some books—the *Odes of Ronsard*, the *Commentaries of Cæsar*, the *Lives of Plutarch*, and, strangely enough, the songs of Clement Marot.

There was time to see all this and more, for when we entered the Cabinet it was empty, and I let my eyes run over my surroundings, more in idle curiosity than with any hope of gathering from them an index to the character of the strange woman, whom we all thought a figure of wax whilst her husband lived, but whose hidden strength was now beginning to be felt and feared. For five-and-twenty years, as wife and queen, she had suffered insult and contumely, such as falls to the lot of few women to bear. She had seen her rights as a wife and mother usurped, and the most brutal speech that has ever, perhaps, been made to a queen by a subject had been flung at her by Anne de Montmorenci. She had endured and waited, until at length the time was ripe for her harvest of vengeance, and then she reaped. No pity had been shown to her, and she had learned how to be merciless. One by one her enemies had fallen. Diana was gone. That was indeed a day of triumph when the insolent favourite was expelled from the Louvre! Then came the turn of others; but Montmorenci still lived, the first peer of the kingdom, Constable of France. In her eagerness to strike at him, for once the crafty Italian overreached herself, and fell into the snares set for her by her deadliest foes. How she escaped the Guise; how she humbled herself, and sought the friendship of the Constable; how she played off ambition against ambition, party against party, and maintained her position to the last, are matters foreign to this story of the disaster of my life. I have merely digressed thus to give some insight into the character of the woman we are to meet, a character so warped by the years of duplicity she had been forced to exercise, that it had become impossible for her to follow a straight course, even when such a course showed no difficulty against the attainment of her ends.

As we waited for Catherine, Marcilly turned towards a little table near to him, and picked up a bouquet of violets set in a holder of golden filigree. He was about to inhale the fragrance of the flowers when Sancerre put his hand on his wrist, saying:—

"*Par le mordieu!* Monsieur! Have you been so long away from the Court not to know that the scent of flowers here is sometimes unhealthy?"

Jean put down the bouquet with a slight start, and Cipierre paled a little beneath his sunburn, as he muttered something under his breath, and then checked himself, for a door we had not observed, so hidden was it in the wainscotting, opened slightly, and a figure stepped into the room.

It was Catherine, and I confess it was not without an emotion of misgiving and dislike that I saw the Queen-Mother again. She was tall for a woman and inclined to stoutness, but her features, beneath the low, triangular cap she wore, were pale and clear cut, and in the sleepy deeps of her dark eyes there gleamed a power and a strength, a light that had never shone in them when her husband was King.

Except for the lace ruff at her neck she was all in black, and at the golden girdle round her waist hung a small poniard, the handle inlaid with gems, a string of *têtes-de-mort*, and an ebony crucifix. She came towards us with a firm but slow step, bending slightly to our bow, and appearing not to recognise either Marcilly or myself, looked at our companions, as she said in a quiet, even voice:—

"Messieurs! The hour is late. It must be a matter of urgency that brings you here."

"It is, madame," replied Sancerre; "we bring you news, and in connection with that news Monsieur the Captain of Orleans and I require the orders of the King."

"Indeed! And the news?" As she spoke she took the violets from the holder Marcilly had laid down, and held them idly in her slender, delicate hand.

"The Admiral has written to the Constable urging him to move at once on Orleans, and Montmorenci is in strong force now at Yvoy le Marron."

They looked at each other steadily as Sancerre spoke, each with the same thought in his heart, each trying to conceal that thought from the other. How much Sancerre knew I am not sure; it was only in after years I discovered that it was Catherine herself who had prompted the sending of the Admiral's letter. In her desperate attempt to free herself from the Guise, she was willing to take any step, however humiliating, though it must have been gall and wormwood to have been compelled to seek aid from Anne de Montmorenci.

Perhaps it was to hide some expression of this on her features that she suddenly turned, and with a quick movement of her hand cast the violets into the fire; then she faced Sancerre again, saying:—

"I know all this and more. I know, too, that the Princess of Condé is close to Orleans, on her way here—here!" she repeated, with a slight laugh.

"Ah! This was the news Richelieu brought!" It was Cipierre who spoke, and Catherine laughed again.

"Perhaps! But I know even more. Monsieur of Arles writes to say that certain men of his guard have been attacked and slain by the following of the Princess, and," here she glanced at us, "I know, moreover, that swords have been drawn on my captain of Chenonceaux in broad day, by those who call themselves faithful servants of the King."

"Madame," answered Sancerre, "if those swords had not been drawn, the Admiral's letter would never have reached."

She began to play with the poniard at her girdle, and to bite her under lip. Cipierre stood grim and silent, and Sancerre watched her with an odd smile on his face, half-amused, half-sarcastic, as he waited for her reply; but none coming, he continued:—

"Would your Majesty prefer our taking our orders on these matters from the Duke of Guise, or the Cardinal of Lorraine?"

"*Mille démons!*" muttered Cipierre, and the Queen said in an icy voice:—

"As the matter is urgent, I will deal with it now. The Princess must not come to Orleans, you understand, and the Constable should be warned that he comes at his peril."

"This will be done, but Anne de Montmorenci will take the risk."

"That is his affair!" She shrugged her shoulders; yet there was a momentary flash of triumph in her eyes. She had got the news she wanted, the certainty that the Constable would move; and now, as if to end the interview, she said:—

"This is all, gentlemen, is it not?"

"All, madame, except one thing. We have two prisoners here, who voluntarily surrender to your Majesty, and beseech your mercy towards them."

At these words both Marcilly and I started, but Sancerre gave us a warning glance, and gripped Cipierre by the arm, as if to restrain him from speech.

She was looking at us now, with a faint smile, whether in mockery or not, playing on the corners of her lips.

"So these are the prisoners," she said; "I know these gentlemen as ——"

"Faithful servants of the King and of the House of Valois," said Sancerre, adding, as he lowered his voice, "there is still time before all is lost."

"Before all is lost." She repeated the words mechanically, and then, as if grasping the full significance of their meaning, she became for a space unconscious of our presence, standing before us as if she was alone with herself. For a breath it seemed as if that dark and subtle heart was to lay aside the mask that covered it. "Lost!" she murmured. "Is it for this my hands are red?" she shuddered slightly, and then recovered herself, her face strangely white, her lips pale. "No! Not yet! I hold cards too!" She laughed bitterly. "Ah, Guise! 'Tis a woman's wit against all your strength!" Then with an effort she brought herself to the moment, and turned to us, once more the actress, once more incapable of pursuing an open course.

"Messieurs," she said, addressing Jean and myself, "I thank you for coming here. But you have done wrong—expect no help from me—none. M. de Guise knows of your coming—there is but one order I can give, but I will give you time ere I issue it. I give you until sunrise to-morrow to escape!"

"Madame," replied Marcilly, "we weighed the risk before we came. We have not come here like bats in the night, to flit away like bats with the dawn. Madame, trust us!"

"*Mordieu!* Madame! You have no traitors around you for once. Do not lose any chance, however small!" It was Cipierre who spoke, impatient at her fencing.

"Traitors! The very tapestry in this room has eyes and ears—aye, and tongues too!" she answered. "But I believe you. For once I believe there are no traitors around me."

And I, who was about to be the blackest of traitors, though I knew it not then, felt a glow coming over me at the words.

"Madame," said Sancerre, "then act on that belief. This is no time for hesitation. Cannot you see what the Guise will do at the first hint of the Constable's moving? The Prince must be saved. He, and he alone, can make head against Lorraine. With his death there would be an end to us. We must play every card now."

Catherine looked around the room as if seeking to find words for her reply. At last she broke out:—

"What would you have me do? I am powerless. Ah!" she hissed, rather than spoke, "they compass me like bees—I can give you no help."

"Your Majesty has only to extend to us the King's peace for our late alleged offences," said Marcilly. "We would then be free of the streets of Orleans. That is all the aid we seek. We answer for the rest."

"We must get that to-night, if it is to be of any use," I added.

She had played her game long enough, whatever her object was in thus delaying. Perhaps it was to test our sincerity. Who can tell? But now she yielded, yet even in yielding remained an actress. She glanced at me for a moment, and then turned to Marcilly with a smile on her face.

"*Monsieur le Comte!* There is some one else whose pardon you should first seek, for not having seen her before. You will find her waiting in the passage," and with a wave of her hand she indicated the door by which she had entered the room.

I knew what she meant, and for a moment my brain seemed to reel; but I felt the Queen's eyes on me, and steadied myself. Marcilly had gone like a flash, but as he opened the door there was a glad cry. Such a cry, such a tone as could only come from the heart of a woman who loved, and it stabbed me like a knife. I knew in a moment that my house of cards had come down. I felt, I cannot tell why, that the love I thought mine was never mine, and with this sprang up a bitter resentment against Marie. It was Jean whom she loved, whom she had always loved, and I—I had been fooled. To think that I had been fighting a phantom all this time! To think that those struggles with myself, those victories gained, those hours of abasement, were due to a spectre of my own creating! How different would the past year have been had I but known! Had I but guessed! But to have been fooled! To have been made a sport and plaything, to while away the dull hours of a born coquette—I, Gaspard de Vibrac, Knight of the King's Order! In a moment it seemed that all my love had turned to a bitter hatred. There was a new madness burning in me, not the madness of passion, of love, but the more baleful fires of hatred and revenge.

And I was wrong even then in the conclusion I jumped to. I know now that it is possible for a woman, a good and pure woman, to mistake the feelings of her heart, to imagine she loves where she does not, and to tread on the edge of a moral precipice, where a false step means the ruin of a soul. And because such a woman was strong enough to save herself, I was base enough to brand her coquette, vile enough to think of revenge. I could hear nothing except that glad cry of welcome; I saw as in a dream before me the figures of the Queen-Mother and our two friends engaged in earnest converse. What they said was nothing to me. I did not hear a word. Once or twice I fancied they looked at me, but I paid no heed to them, standing a little apart leaning on the hilt of my sword, my soul once more adrift on that dark sea from which but so short a while since I thought I had come safe to port. So I stood until the tension was broken by Catherine's measured voice:—

"Monsieur de Vibrac! Be so good as to call Bentivoglio here. We will see the King at once!"

PART VIII.

CHAPTER XV.

THE KING'S PEACE.

I STARTED at the words; but they brought me to myself, and with a bow I turned and passed into the ante-chamber. Some one was just quitting the room as I entered, for I caught the flash of a gay cloak as the Italian closed the door opposite to me, after his departing visitor, and then turned round with that eternal, treacherous smile of his, saying:—

"*Per Bacco!* Your audience has been a long one!"

"'Tis likely to be longer still. Her Majesty wishes to see you. We go to the King."

He lifted his eyebrows slightly at my last words, only saying, however, as he stepped to the archway:—

"Her nightly visit. It will not continue for long."

"Is it really so bad?"

He stopped, his hands resting on the folds of the curtain, then, bending forwards, he said in a low tone:—

"I keep relays of horses to two frontiers."

There was no more said, and we stepped into the

Cabinet. Marcilly had returned, radiant and happy; but, in the quick glance I cast around me on entering I did not see Marie, and from my soul I was glad of this. I could not have endured meeting her. In the tumult then in my heart it would have been impossible to have faced her without betraying myself.

There was a whispered word or so between Catherine and her chamberlain, and then she spoke loudly, and with an imperious note in her voice:—

"To the King—by the private way!" and, the Italian leading, we followed the Queen-Mother through the door by which she had entered the Cabinet, and along a passage lighted by a small lamp at its extreme end. Here we came to another door, which Bentivoglio opened with a master-key, and, free of this, found ourselves at the base of a wide stairway that led to the apartments of the King.

All was in light—in white, dazzling light. There was a quick word of command, a flash of steel, the guard of the King's Carabiniers presented arms, and Richelieu stepped forwards, no longer the reckless soldier, but the suave courtier. The Star of the Order gleamed upon his silver cuirass, his short scarlet cloak was thrown back over his broad shoulders, and the blood-red plumes of his hat swept the polished flooring as he bowed before the Medicis.

"The King—my son—how is he?" asked Catherine.

"But as before, madame. His Majesty has asked for your Grace twice."

The Queen-Mother crossed herself, and preceded by Richelieu, and followed by us, began to ascend the stairs, at the head of which we could see a gaily dressed group assembled, and amongst them some ladies, maids of honour, no doubt, to the reigning Queen.

The balustrade terminated in a square column of veined granite, upon which was set a marble Aphrodite, one arm outstretched as if casting a flower. From the rear of the party, where I was with Bentivoglio, who had dropped to my side, the lights made the goddess burn a rose-red, as if the statue were a living, palpitating thing. And, as I looked, a figure moved out of the throng above us, and stood beside the Venus; the figure of a woman, tall and stately, with deep, sleepy eyes and passionate lips, a living embodiment of the artist's dream.

The Italian nudged me, for he saw too. "The Limeuil," he whispered, "for whom your Condé will lose his honour."

Ay! The words were almost prophetic, for it was for the sake of this woman before us that Condé, he for whom we were risking so much, trailed the honour of Bourbon in the dust, and broke the true heart of his wife, casting aside the priceless ruby for the sham, glittering crystal. If ever man was a moral murderer, he was; but he died like a gentleman and a soldier, whilst I—no, I dare not cast a stone!

And even as I write this there comes to me the memory of that grim story of the field of Jarnac, of that last devoted charge for the sweet peril of Christ and the Fatherland, of Montesquiou's deed of blood, and of that red sunset when Anjou stood in doubt and hesitation before a stripped and mangled corpse.

And there came a cry from those around, "She comes! She comes!" and a tall, veiled woman stepped slowly forwards through the battle-worn group. Casting aside her veil, she looked long, with cold, hard eyes on the disfigured features of the dead, and suddenly she laughed—a laugh that chilled the blood of all—as she pointed in triumph with her jewelled hand to the thing at her feet.

"It is he, Condé," she said. "*Enfin!*" and she kicked the dead face with her dainty shoe.

And whilst I gazed at her, we reached the landing, where all bowed with reverence to the Widow of France, as Catherine was called.

As we came up there was a slight murmur of surprise and curiosity, which even the presence of the Queen-Mother was unable to totally suppress, and there were inquiring looks and glances interchanged, for it takes but a short time to forget in a Court, and we, who had been but last year so well known, were almost as strangers now.

I could not forbear a glance at the Limeuil, which she returned with interest, coquette to her finger-tips; and then, dropping her large eyes, she whispered something to a girl beside her, with a little laugh, as musical as the chime of a bell.

We were, however, not altogether unknown. Some one, I could not see whom, did recognise us, and I distinctly caught the words—

"What madness! To come back now!"

"Ay! Two more flies in the cobweb."

I turned to the voices. The first speaker I could not make out, but the second I was certain of. It was the jester of the Martroi. He was leaning against the wall, swinging his bauble, and surrounded by a group of three or four people, listening, no doubt, to his quips and jests.

All this occurred very rapidly, and then we passed the landing, passed the folding doors, and entered the ante-chamber beyond. Some of those who were on the landing followed us, the jester amongst the number; but here we were all stopped by a chamberlain, and Catherine, attended but by Sancerre and Cipierre, entered the private apartments of the King.

Marcilly and I stood alone, a little apart from the rest, who were grouped in knots, conversing in low, subdued tones. Bentivoglio had approached the jester and some others who were gathered round Mademoiselle de Limeuil, and Richelieu, after a quick word or so with the guard at the King's door, turned as if to join them, but, changing his mind, came towards us, and, bowing, said:—

"Permit me, messieurs, to present myself."

"It is unnecessary," I said; "the Sieur de Richelieu needs no presentation."

"In a way we are already acquainted," smiled Jean.

"Ah!" And Richelieu twisted his heavy moustache, "I never thought I could have been so deceived. Your resemblance to the Prince is simply marvellous."

"Your mistake was fortunate for me, though," said Marcilly.

Richelieu laughed. "For the first time in my life I thought I had seen a ghost. I confess I was fairly unnerved. But, messieurs, since two at least of us have exchanged a pass together, and since, as I understand, the King has recovered two good swords, I would ask the favour of your joining me at my quarters, after this is over, to empty a skin of Gascony."

"It is impossible, I regret to say," replied Marcilly, and I added my excuses.

"We will get Le Brusquet to come," he urged; "the jester sings rarely, and has a merry wit."

But it was not to be, and Richelieu took our excuses with an air of disappointment and a little annoyance.

I, for one, had my doubts about this sudden geniality on the part of Antony de Richelieu, and these doubts were not set at rest by the chagrin he displayed. My thoughts, however, were diverted from this matter, for, as Richelieu expressed his disappointment to us, the door of the King's chamber opened as if to let some one pass, and at the same moment we heard a high-pitched querulous voice:—

"Lights! I want more lights! Where is Marie? I cannot see her."

It was the King who spoke. Every murmur was stilled where we were, and the door closed softly again, no one coming forth. For a moment or so there was absolute silence, and all glanced anxiously at one another, reading in each other's faces and eyes the confirmation of their misgivings. For there was in that voice an expression of pain and suffering, an intolerable agony, that told its own tale. It was a presage of the end to be, that filled us with pity and awe, and kept the most heedless tongue checked. At last some one, I know not whom, said softly, yet not so low but that the words reached us:—

"He calls for the Queen."

"She is with him," answered the Limeuil; adding, "he is better; the fever has quite gone. René himself told me so."

"That was the Jesuit's Bark," remarked Bentivoglio; "'tis a rare specific."

"Ay, rare indeed!" said the one who had first spoken, adding, "is it true he is to be blooded in the tongue?"

Bentivoglio shrugged his shoulders; but now the door opened once more, and there stepped out a tall figure, robed in brown taffeta, with a small cap of black velvet on his head. It was René himself, and he was immediately surrounded by a group, and eagerly questioned as to the King's health. But for the present their curiosity had to be satisfied with a brief "the King is better," and René, to whom we were known, turned to us, and, beckoning with his hand, said:—

"Messieurs! Have the goodness to follow me."

Then, as we followed the physician, we heard whispers and murmurs, whilst eager questions, mingled with our names, flew from mouth to mouth, for curiosity had not been idle as we stood awaiting our audience. There were one or two who had recognised us, not to speak of Bentivoglio and Richelieu, and these were only too ready to pass their information on; so that as much as could be known of us was known already to that idle crowd of human moths that clung to the corridors and tapestries of the palace.

"They have been pardoned, I hear," said one.

"How can that be?" was the reply; "the amnesty is over."

"They might use Marcilly as a living effigy for the Prince—he would do well for a proxy," said the jester; and then amidst the buzzing I caught another speech that made me burn. It came from the red lips of Isabel de Limeuil.

"So that is De Vibrac! What was that story about him and ——" I did not hear the rest, although I could guess; and with an inward curse at the tongue of scandal, that seemed to be able to stretch across space and time, I followed the physician and Jean into the King's chamber, the huissier, in violet and gold, closing the door after us, shutting out the buzzing voices and the prying eyes of the restless crowd in the anteroom.

"Lights! I want more light!" The breeze, as it sweeps through my open study window, and past the dark, shaking curtains, seems to bring with it the thin, high voice of the King; and as I write these lines, I can see before me that room, in bright, glaring light—a light that almost pained the eyes to look upon, and yet was but twilight to the dim sight of that poor, dying boy, who stared at us from his proppings of cushions, and who was now on the threshold of that long, dark night, that, with God's mercy, was to bring with it a morning, brilliant with the splendour that the eye of man has not seen, glorious with the glory of the infinite starlands of Eternity.

But what caught us, what arrested our attention, so that it could not linger for a moment on the rich and luxurious room, so that we hardly saw the group before us, so that we but seemed to realise, as though it were an angelic thing of air, the figure of a woman standing at the bedside, and looking with infinite compassion and tenderness on the pain-worn face beneath her, was that face itself. There it was, shining out white and pallid from the white pillows, with that one red spot on the forehead, the crimson seal of that terrible sickness, of that awful disease, which showed itself in the last stages of Francis's illness, and which, even if he had lived, would have placed him amongst those whom men set aside from themselves as accursed by God, amongst those whom man may pity in his heart, yet never look upon without horror and loathing.

There are those who deny the story, and, in truth, the King died before the new sickness had developed. Its presence was unsuspected by all except two—even the Queen, Mary of Scotland, who now stood bending with sweet, pitiful eyes over her husband, did not dream of it; but René knew, and Catherine knew, and I knew when I saw, for it had come upon a man so in the Sicilies, when I served there with Ponthieu, and it was not to be mistaken.

To my mind the King might have lived but for that scar on his forehead. He died, as we know, of a pain in the ear, as Bentivoglio mockingly said, and the phrase has become a bye-word.

There is, however, a chapter of history that has yet to be told, but he who writes it must first learn the secrets that lie locked up in the hearts of the dead, for Catherine is gone, and René sleeps his last sleep.

Ay! I can picture it all—the hopes, the fears, and then the dread certainty. Then comes the struggle between the love of a mother and the pride of race. It is a choice between unspeakable shame and death that hides all things. The Queen-Mother and René are alone together with the King. He sleeps, and the lights that ever blaze within the room burn on that red splash, the mark of the Unclean. The eyes of Catherine meet those of René, and the man of science knows that the choice has been made—that pride has conquered love.

"It must be now," she says, and then, with head held high, and dry, burning eyes, the Medicis steps from the room.

And René was alone with his King. What happened then will never be known until the last great trumpet blares out its call, and you and I, my friends, stand at God's Throne to answer for our souls; but when the morning came, Charles the Ninth was King of France.

All this was to happen in a few days, nay, in a few hours; but at the moment, in the hearts of those who stood around, had sprung up a hope—the fever was gone—the King would live.

We stepped forwards and knelt by the bedside, and the thin hand of the boy wavered over us as he asked:—

"Are these my friends come back?"

Then Catherine bent down and whispered in his ear, and Francis spoke again.

"Pardon them! I would have pardoned them all. There was Castelnau, who used to play with me when I was a boy. There was Ste. Marie, who taught me to ride. There is Condé, always gay and laughing. And I—I have not laughed for months." He stopped for a moment, and went on, "But my cousin of Guise and the Cardinal will not let me pardon any one—they forbid it," he added weakly.

"My son," said the Medicis, "are you not King of France?"

A faint flush spread over the ivory face, the pale lips drew themselves together obstinately, and he muttered to himself:—

"Yes! Yes! I am King," and then, in a louder tone: "I will be King for once—shall I not, Marie?" and he turned to his wife.

And the most beautiful lips in the world pleaded for us, and put courage into the heart of the King; and, boy as he was, there seemed to come upon him all the dignity of his high estate, as he stretched out his hand again to us.

"I pardon you the past, messieurs—I give you the King's peace—the peace that the King himself knows not."

Then we touched the thin hand with our lips, and, rising without a word, for there was something in the moment that took speech from us, stepped behind the group at the head of the bed, as the little King leaned back again on his pillows, all trace of the momentary strength in his face vanishing. Catherine turned towards us, as if about to give us the signal to go, when the King spoke again.

"My mother," he said, "am I going to die?"

A look of pain came over the marble features of Catherine; she bent over the boy, as if to hide her features, and her voice was very low as she answered: "No! No! My son."

And the child had become a child once more.

"I do not want to die," he wailed. "I am King. Why should a King die?" He stopped and beckoned to Cipierre.

"Monsieur," he said, as the Vicomte approached, "you are a brave soldier, you have fought many battles. You must save your King from death."

The veteran half-turned away as he answered:—

"I, and all your soldiers, my King, would die to save you."

"Then you will not let death come? It comes in the dark, monsieur, that is why I always have these lights. You must not let death come. You must stand there! There!" he pointed to the foot of the bed and went on: "And my guards, who would die for me, must stand around, then death will not touch the King of France."

I saw the features of the old war-wolf work convulsively as he bowed before the King and muttered hoarsely, "It shall be done".

There was no word spoken now. There was nothing to say. The lights burned brightly on the pallid features of the boy, who had flung himself back amidst his pillows, and wearily closed his eyes.

We stood still, looking at each other in silence. I saw Catherine and René exchange a glance, and then from behind us came a single, half-suppressed sob. It was from the heart of the fair young Queen, as, with a quick, sudden movement, she turned and passed into an inner apartment.

And the Medicis spoke now in her icy, measured voice:—

"Messieurs, the King sleeps."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE KING'S SIGNET.

BOWING low, we stepped from the King's bedside and moved towards the door, Catherine stopping Sancerre to give a last injunction: "You will leave by the private way, through my apartments—tell Bentivoglio".

She was answered in an undertone, so that I could not catch the speech, and the next moment we re-entered the ante-chamber, closely followed by René.

Those whom we had left were still there, in curious expectation; but René repeated to them the words of the Medicis—"The King sleeps"—and there followed the murmurs of low converse, and a subdued bustle of departure, only those remaining whose duties required them to stay—a page or so, the officer of the night, and the archers at the door.

Bentivoglio and Richelieu moved together towards us, and Sancerre, whispering Catherine's command in the chamberlain's ear, turned to Richelieu and said:—

"Monsieur! You will await Her Majesty the Queen-Mother here."

A dark shade gathered on Richelieu's brow.

"I command the guards in the galleries," he answered; "Monsieur de Bailleul," and he indicated a tall, grim-looking soldier, who stood stiffly, a little apart from the others, "is on duty here to-night."

"You do not follow me, Monsieur de Richelieu," said Sancerre. "I said your orders were to await Her Majesty. It remains for you to obey or not," and with that the old Count swung round on his heel, and moved forwards to the stairway, leaving Richelieu biting his moustache with anger.

We exchanged a glance as we passed, and I read enough in Richelieu's eye to understand that it was not any delay in getting at his skin of wine that touched him, but that this order of Catherine had crossed some design which had little to do with the jests of Le Brusquet, or the vintage of Gascogne.

We left him, apparently debating in his mind whether he should obey the commands he had received or not, and returned as we came. On entering the passage leading to Catherine's apartments, Marcilly and I were side by side, and he put his hand on my arm with a friendly pressure, as he said, "I think we win".

Oh! Win or lose! It was all one to me now; but the touch of his hand stirred the smouldering hate in my heart towards the man who had come between me and the woman I loved. I shrank back from him, muttering something, I do not know myself what, and thankful for the gloom that hid the expression which must have passed over my features.

It is a profound and awful mystery that man should carry within himself the poison that can kill his soul.

Who shall fathom this strange thing? Not you nor I, my friends; but it remains true that the Almighty hand has placed side by side in our hearts the noblest aspirations and the most deadly passions. It is as if a gardener rears, with infinite pain and labour, a beautiful plant, and then grafts on to it a poisonous cutting, whose growth means death to the exquisite thing on which such labour and such care have been spent. And the poison herbs were growing apace within me now, spreading their long arms about my soul, choking, with their creeping growth, all the manly, the noble, the pure thoughts that, but for my own folly, might have made me a man fit to hold my head high amongst my fellows.

All these thoughts did not pass through me then. They came with the after years, with memory, with shame, and a too late repentance. But at the time when I shrank back from Marcilly and followed my companions, the last of all, I was conscious only of a hideous turmoil in my soul; and I saw, with an ever-increasing dread and horror, that I had again approached the edge of that abyss, from which but so short a while back I thought I had escaped, and whose dark deeps were now calling me down to them with an irresistible force.

In a few paces we reached the Cabinet. Bentivoglio with suave politeness held open the door to let us pass, and as I stepped in, the last of all, I became conscious that there was some one there. For the figure of a woman arose from a chair near the window, where she had been sitting caressing

Nambu, the Barbary ape, and stood in the half-light waiting for us to advance.

A second glance assured me that it was no other than Mary of Scotland, the young Queen of France herself, and with that recognition there came to me like lightning the thought that something had arisen to thwart our plans, else why should she, the secret friend of Condé, be here, and evidently expecting us?

For a moment we stood in irresolute surprise, and then the Italian recovered himself.

"Your Majesty—here—and alone," he began; but she stopped him with a slight gesture of the hand, and, turning to Sancerre, said with that sweet, low voice of hers:—

"My lord! This should have been given to you by the Queen, my mother. 'Tis the King's signet. Take it now." She placed the ring in Sancerre's hand, as she added, a little sadly, "I could trust no one to give it to you. This will pass you and," she hesitated a little, "your friends free, for there are those who would try and stop you, even to-night, on the chance of the King's pardon being recalled to-morrow. Nay, not a word, Sancerre!" she went on, with a slight flush on her face, as the old man began to pour forth his thanks; "it is for the cause we all have at heart, and may God give you success!"

Then Louis de Beuil knelt before his Queen. "Your Majesty had in us loyal and faithful subjects before—you now have men who are your very slaves;" so saying, he touched her hand with his lips, and, rising to his feet, stood beside her, a towering figure, looking, with his long white beard and silver hair, like some good enchanter of the legends of romance.

It was a curious picture—the light from the Mercury flickering over the room, the ape cowering amongst his cushions, staring at us with bead-like, unthinking eyes, the group of stern men around that fair young figure, that Queen who was but Queen for a day.

There as she stood, with the lights and shadows playing on her, and her sweet, trustful face turned towards us, I caught myself wondering why should she—the niece of Guise—be doing her utmost to help his most deadly foe? Was it pity alone? Or was there truth in the whisperings of the Court, that Mary of Scotland had lost her heart, ere she was Queen of France, to the gay and gallant Bourbon, and that in secret she was ever true to her love? And even as I put these thoughts from me, the Queen broke the silence.

"Messieurs! It is late. We must ask Bentivoglio to conduct us to the King."

With a slight inclination of her head, and preceded by Bentivoglio, she left the Cabinet. When she had gone, we gathered round Sancerre, who stood near the lamp, the ring in his hand.

"*Tudieu!*" he laughed, as he slipped the signet on his finger, I see now why Richelieu wished to accompany us. I would wager my best hawk against a hedge-crow that we meet him yet. Come, gentlemen!"

So saying, he led the way from the Cabinet towards the outer gateway, where Lorgnac was yet at his vigil.

"Still on duty?" said Cipierre, stopping to exchange a word with the lieutenant of the guard, who was a favourite of his.

"As you see, monsieur."

"What! Do they make you watch all night? It was not so in my time."

"No, monsieur!" replied the young soldier; "but till midnight, when Créqui relieves me—good-night, messieurs!"

"Good-night, De Lorgnac!" We returned his greeting, and moving quickly along the corridor, gained the entrance hall, where we found that Sancerre's words were true, for Richelieu was there, warming himself at the fire, and ranged near the door, stood at least a dozen of his carabiniers.

We looked at one another in surprise, and Richelieu stopped rubbing his hands together at the blaze in the grate; then, putting on his plumed hat, that lay on a chair beside him, he came towards us.

As he approached, Sancerre addressed him. "You here, monsieur! I had thought your duties were with the Queen-Mother."

"My duties are where my orders carry me," sneered Richelieu, "and, at the moment, these duties are painful—to others;" then turning to us, he said, in a loud voice: "Messieurs De Marcilly and De Vibrac! I arrest you in the King's name! Your swords, please, gentlemen!"

"*Morbleu!*" exclaimed Cipierre. "This is too much, monsieur! I demand your authority!"

Richelieu shrugged his shoulders. "It is at the door, Monsieur le Vicomte," and he pointed to his troopers where they stood, grim and motionless.

There was a veiled triumph in his voice, a studied insolence in his manner, that made our blood boil, and Cipierre, ever hasty, was roused at once.

"You will do this at your peril, sir," he began, but Sancerre stayed him, and, turning towards Richelieu, looked him steadily in the face, as he asked:—

"Monsieur! Do I understand you to say you have the orders of the King—the King, mind you—for your action?"

But Richelieu was not to be browbeaten. He cocked his hat fiercely on the side of his head, and answered with a haughtiness equal to that of the Count:—

"Monsieur de Sancerre! It is sufficient for me that I have my orders. It is my duty to see them carried out, and yours, monsieur, not to hinder me."

"Precisely! Provided you have orders."

"Monsieur!"

"Come, monsieur! There must be some mistake. One does not arrest gentlemen who have but a moment ago received the King's pardon. If you have the King's warrant, produce it, and the matter is ended."

Sancerre's words had their effect on the man. He had started perceptibly at the mention of the King's pardon, and for a moment he was shaken. But Richewas a hardy villain, and steeled himself. He turned insolently from Sancerre, saying:—

"I cannot stand here talking all night. Messieurs, your swords—or must I use force?"

But here Cipierre's patience was exhausted. "Stay!" he cried. "I give you my word, monsieur, that if you do not produce your authority, and if you arrest these gentlemen by force without producing it, that I, Philibert de Marcilly, Captain of Orleans, and Colonel-General of Cavalry, will break you like a reed. There is an old story, monsieur, of an earthen vessel and a metal pot going together down stream—you have worn the black robe, and ought to know the fable—and I take it you are wise enough to apply it. Come, sir, no more fencing, your authority!"

There was a ring in the Vicomte's voice that showed he meant every word he said. It was one thing to beard Sancerre, who, highly placed as he was, held no great office; it was, however, quite another thing to cross Cipierre, whose power as Governor of Orleans, and as a General of Cavalry, was sufficient to crush a man like Richelieu easily. He felt, too, that every moment he delayed weakened the ground under his feet, and made our belief that he held no warrant for the arrest a certainty. As a matter of fact he had not, and confessed it the next moment.

"I have not the warrant with me," he said sullenly.

"Whose was the order then, the King's—the Chancellor's?"

"My instructions were from the Cardinal," and then recovering his spirit, "and they are enough for me."

Cipierre laughed harshly. "So, monsieur, your orders came from the Cardinal, and they are enough for you, are they? Since when did Charles of Lorraine become Colonel of Carabiniers? Or is it that you think you wear the iron and yellow of Guise, instead of the silver and red of the King's House? Come, Sancerre, end this farce—show him the signet, and let him begone!"

Richelieu had paled to the lips with anger as Cipierre spoke; but prudence, and perhaps fear, kept him still—and now his eyes were fixed on the signet that Sancerre held towards him.

"It is the King's," he said, in a voice thick with rage.

"And you obey that, or do you refuse? If you refuse, I will order your own men to arrest you," said the Vicomte.

"I have no option but to obey."

"Very well! Call off your guard from the door! And to-morrow the King will know what a servant he has in you."

Richelieu was no coward, and the stinging words of Cipierre's voice raised the man to fury. He put his hand to the hilt of his sword, and then, recollecting himself, withdrew it slowly; but it was in a voice that trembled with passion that he answered:—

"Monsieur le Vicomte, I obey the King's signet. These gentlemen are free. But you, monsieur—I have a word with you ——"

"Tush, man!" and Cipierre broke in roughly upon his speech. "You think you are in a tavern. I cannot cross swords with you. The difference between us is too great. Come! Call off your guards!"

And Richelieu did as he was bidden without another word. In passing out, however, I had my opportunity: "Monsieur," I said, "I shall be pleased to hear the word you intended for Monsieur le Vicomte".

A dark flush came on his face. "In another place," he answered.

"In your own place, and at your own time, monsieur. I commend myself to you," and with a slight bow we separated.

"They will do their utmost to get the pardon recalled to-morrow," said Marcilly, as we trotted down the silent square of Ste. Croix.

"Remember, however," I said, "that I am under the protection of Monsieur of Arles. He wants me as a free agent, as he said. I fear little for myself for the next few days."

"I will be with the Queen-Mother at her rising," said Sancerre, "and you, gentlemen, must see the Prince early to-morrow and arrange all. There must be no delays now. In case of accidents you had better keep this signet for the present," and he handed the ring to Marcilly.

We left Sancerre at his house, and, the hour being late, pushed on at a round pace homewards. In a few minutes we were again in the Martroi, now to all appearance totally deserted, except by the watchmen keeping ward over the scaffoldings and wooden galleries that filled the square. Here and there they had lit fires, and were huddled around them, for the winter wind blew chill, though the night was clear as crystal and the moon was out.

On the far side of the square, behind the huge scaffolding, which almost hid the houses beyond them from view, there seemed to be a wakeful and merry party around the night fire, which spluttered up redly there, casting its light on the tracery of the crossed beams and network of galleries above it. Some one was singing, but we could not catch the words of the song, though the chorus came to us distinctly:—

Bon jour! Ma Margoton!
Bon jour! Belle mignonne!

The cheery refrain jarred on our ears coming as it did from almost under the spot where Condé was to die, where, if the plans of the Guise succeeded, not only would Condé die, but with him, as we thought, our France—the France that we loved so well.

We were now almost opposite Cipierre's house, where the wooden galleries in the square were but partly finished. It was here, as we slackened pace to approach the gates, that we saw a man, mounted on a white horse, emerge from the shadow of the scaffolding, and come half out into the moonlight.

Something in his air and manner made me feel that I knew him, and then a small, dark figure slipped from the saddle behind him, and ran towards us. It was Majolais, as I live!

"*Blitzen!*" swore one of the reiters, as he drew his sword and attempted to make a cut at the dwarf, but I struck the blade up, saying:—

"A friend! A friend! Here, Majolais!"

The next moment the imp was at my side, and, thrusting a packet into my hand, was off again like a flash.

"Stay! Stay!" called out both Cipierre and Marcilly, but the dwarf only laughed — that cackling, tongueless laugh of his—and sprang behind the saddle of the white horse, whilst its rider, turning its head on the instant, went off at a gallop.

"Come back!" shouted Cipierre, and an answer came to us through the moonlight:—

"*Bon coq, Coqueville!*" And then we heard him going ding-dong down the deserted streets.

PART IX.

CHAPTER XVII.

"LE PETIT HOMME TANT JOLI."

So taken aback were we that for a breath we did not realise who it was. We heard the reckless cry riding back to us through the shivering winter moonlight, we heard the excited "*Hou! hou!*" of the alarmed watch, and the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, that stilled suddenly as the rider turned into a side street, that shut out all sound, and then, only then did the understanding of the thing come to us, and Marcilly almost shouted out:—

"By all the saints! 'Tis Coqueville! What blind folly!" and with an oath he struck his gloved hand on the flap of his holster.

"Perhaps this explains things," and I held up at arm's height the letter Majolais had given to me, whilst Cipierre cut in:—

"Come then, let us read it. We have no time to waste."

A moment after we were in the hall of Cipierre's house, grouped around the letter, which I had handed to Marcilly, whilst a tall Swiss held a lighted candle so that we could read.

"From the Princess," said Jean, cutting the yellow seals with the point of his dagger, and we bent over and read with him. It was from madame herself, explaining her change of plan, and stating that she, with a small suite, were at the moment lying in safe concealment in the deserted château of St. Loup. She went on to say it was here her husband was to be brought, and that she had horses provided to take the Prince, not to Poitou, but to her uncle, the Constable.

"Montmorenci," said Cipierre; "that is not so bad. He is closer than Coligny."

"Yes, there is something in this, especially as, from what passed to-day between Sancerre and the Queen-Mother, I gather that the old fox is leaving his earth," I said, and added, "but does not madame say anything of this?"

"Not a word! Stay! You are right," and Marcilly turned over the page. "It's here in the postscript. 'The Constable has moved from Yvoy le Marron.' If this is true, 'tis only a five-league ride to reach him, if we could but effect the escape the day after to-morrow."

"Bravo, Ponthieu!" I burst out.

"Ponthieu! Eh? What do you mean?" asked Cipierre.

"That the Constable would never have moved but for a gallant gentleman of Gascony, one Perducas de Ponthieu, who risked his life ten times over for the Cause—but the story is a long one, monsieur, and it grows late."

As I spoke the huge clock in the hall struck midnight, and the bronze bell in the courtyard clanged out a hoarse echo of the hour.

"Ste. Croix! I did not believe we were so far into to-morrow," said Cipierre; "it is, indeed, too late for further talk, gentlemen, and you need rest."

He spoke truly enough, for even Marcilly, despite his iron endurance, looked pale and worn, and I—I was longing to be alone.

And at last I had my desire, and regretted it the instant it came. In the excitement of passing events I was taken out of myself; but here, in this huge bedroom, where the candles seemed but to make little circles of light, where the logs burned low on the hearth, where thoughts black as the shadows that flitted in the uneasy light over the heavy curtains of the bed and thick tapestries on the walls crowded round me, I dreaded my lonliness. For a moment I thought of seeking Badehorn to discuss with him arrangements for the morrow, and then I laughed at my weakness, and, undressing, flung myself into a large easy chair by the fire, for I felt it was useless trying to sleep. My body was wearied, it is true, but my brain was working like a clock—it was the old story, that mania which I had fought so long, and thought defeated, come back again stronger, more insistent than ever.

Sometimes, when I think of this period of my life, I try to delude myself into the belief that I was mad then; that it was not I, Gaspard de Vibrac, who walked the earth, but a fiend that had ousted my soul from its earthly tenement—else why was this hateful consciousness of a double presence within me? What was this impalpable, but resistless, power, that was able to force me, despite my struggles, to follow its malign course?

But let this rest! Mad or sane, I have to answer for my past, and the scroll, with its damning record, is running red before my eyes as I write; but then, as I sat there, the things that were to come, the things that were to be of my own doing, seemed to quiver like uneasy phantoms before me, and to finally resolve themselves into the one devilish thing that made me what I am.

Listen! I had sought to injure Marcilly, therefore I hated him. I had lowered myself to play the traitor to him in all that man holds dearest. But that he stood between me and my love, this would not have been, and I hated him the more for that. I had tried to win my way back to honour, and all but succeeded, when, but a few hours ago, I found, as I thought—I jumped to conclusions as usual—that I had been made the victim of a coquette's pastime. All my vanity, all my self-love was wounded and in arms—I was filled with the rage that burns in a heart in which love is turned to anger. I was capable of anything, and I had paved the way for this total descent. It was no case, it never is, of one becoming at once supremely vile. I would have revenge, a full and complete revenge for my abasement, and then came the whispered temptation that lost me my soul.

I started as the thought came to me, and then with it came a horror and loathing of the evil thing. I sprang from my chair, and paced the room. It could not be. It was impossible. I looked around me like a guilty man, and then I clutched at a straw. I tried to pray, but my heart would not feel the words that my cold lips uttered, and for the first time I rose to my feet without even that momentary strength that prayer had hitherto given me. As I glanced around me, I saw what I had not noticed before—a flagon of wine, and near it a cup, left there by the thoughtful care of Cipierre's servants. Three times did I fill the cup to the brim and drain it. I wanted sleep, rest, forgetfulness—if it was but for a moment. I wanted to become oblivious of the new horror that had come upon me, to obtain in the Lethe of sleep that peace which cannot come even to those who die. For death is but the door which opens to lead us into another life. We know not if it brings rest, we know not if we leave behind us anything except the earthly shell of the soul. But sleep—there is rest in it—if only for a little while. And for a space it came to me, a deep and dreamless slumber, and when I awoke the morning was well advanced. I made my toilet, and looked out of the lattice window. The day was one in which sunlight and mist strove with each other, and the sun was winning, aided by a breeze which shred the clouds into woolly wisps, that floated westwards in long lines, with patches of blue sky between them.

The rest had done me good. I held my hand to the light, and it was steady, not trembling like an aspen leaf, as it was when I lay down to sleep; but the evil thing in my mind was still there, and, strange to say, I no longer looked at it with the horror and loathing of a few hours back.

As I turned from the window there was a knock at the door, and I heard Marcilly's voice asking if he could come in.

"Come in," I answered back, and my voice was gay and cordial, for a traitor must know how to be a hypocrite.

Jean entered looking refreshed and strong again, his slight, spare figure set off to advantage in the rich brown and yellow of his dress, whilst a short cloak of the same colours, fastened at the throat by a jewelled clasp, was hung carelessly over his shoulders.

"Is it time to be moving?" I asked, as he came in, adding, "I fear I have slept late."

"There is time yet, Vibrac," he answered, seating himself in the arm-chair and playing with his gloves. There was something on his mind, something he desired to say; but I would not help him, and at last he spoke:—

"Gaspard," he said, "there is a thing I want you to do for me."

I remained silent, our eyes met for a moment, and then he went on, his voice shaking a little: "I must not see Marie again. The sight of her unmans me. I want you, however, to do this for me;" he pulled from his breast pocket a letter which he held in his hand. "I want you to give this to Marie. It is my farewell," and he laughed a mirthless, nervous laugh.

"Give it to me!" I replied, stretching out my hand; "it will reach madame's hands in safety."

"I thank you," and as he handed me the letter a thought struck me, and it was merely to make conversation that I gave utterance to it, little imagining to what it would lead.

"Has it never occurred to you, Marcilly, that your wife is in very great danger here?"

"I don't follow," he answered, though he paled a little.

"Merely this—that if there is any hitch in our attempt, to save herself Catherine will sacrifice every one to the Guise. I doubt if any mercy will be shown to any one belonging to you—and you remember, too, that the St. André, and Achon above all, claim your wife's estates of Chaumont."

"They would never dare," he said, but I interrupted him.

"The estates are large, I believe, and you recollect the case of Mademoiselle de Luynes."

He leaned back helplessly in his chair, biting his lip, and twisting at his moustache, and as I looked at him, tossed with mental agony, and thought, too, of the hideous story of which I had just reminded him, my good angel made a last effort, and touched me with pity. I went up to him, and put my hand on his shoulder.

"See, Marcilly!" I said. "You want a cool brain and a steady nerve for this, and that you will never have as long as your wife is here. Why not get her away? Let her join the Princess at St. Loup at once, and thence go on with her to her refuge with the Constable."

His face brightened at once. "If that could be done! But Catherine will never let her go."

"Leave that to me," I said. "I will manage that. What is more natural than that madame should come to Cipierre's house to see you. She has been here constantly before, and her coming will arouse no suspicion. From the Martroi to St. Loup is scarce two hours' ride, and she would be with the Princess before any one even began to suspect that the bird had flown."

He sprang up and wrung my hand.

"Do this," he said, "and you will loose a millstone from my neck."

"Make your mind easy; and is it not time to start?"

"In a half-hour," he said, "when we have breakfasted."

Punctually to the half-hour we started. Cipierre had already gone on to the palace, but four of his Swiss troopers came with us, and, confident in the King's pardon, and in the protection afforded by an escort wearing the colours of the Captain of Orleans, we had no fear of meeting any one, not even the Guise himself.

We rode slowly up the crowded Rue Royale, talking gaily of a hundred things to cover that which was in our minds. We spoke of Coqueville, and wondered if he had got free of the town. It was all but impossible, as we thought, and if arrested, we knew there would be no mercy shown to him, who, with the exception perhaps of Renaudie, had been the most daring and able leader of the Amboisards. And even as we spoke of him the old proverb came true, for in the pushing, swaying crowd in the street I caught a glimpse of the dwarf, his gay clothes covered with patches of mud, as if he had fallen heavily, and close to him was Coqueville himself, stalking quietly through the press, evidently making his way towards the city gates.

"See there!" I whispered to Marcilly, but his eye was as quick as mine.

"So they have not got off. They are lost if they are recognised now—take no notice."

As he spoke the dwarf turned his head and saw us, showing his teeth in a knowing smile, whilst he plucked Coqueville by his cloak, but the latter looked at us as if we were perfect strangers, and began to cross the road, slowly followed by his companion.

It was at this juncture that a party of horsemen came sharply into the street. They rode at a trot, utterly regardless of the people, and the crowd gave before them in fear.

It was Achon himself who rode at the head of these men—Achon, booted and spurred like a carabinier of the guard, a steel corselet glinting under his purple mantle, and swinging in his right hand a long, straight cutting whip. In the stir caused by the pace at which Monsieur of Arles and his men came on, Coqueville slipped out of sight, but, confused by the crowd, Majolais hesitated and looked around him. Achon's horse swerved slightly at the black, misshapen figure; but pulling him back almost on his haunches, the prelate raised his whip and struck the Moor savagely across the face. For a moment, half-blinded and bleeding, Majolais staggered back, and then sprang at Achon, something flashing brightly in his hand; but the cruel whip came down again like lightning, and, with a shriek, the dwarf rolled over on the cobble stones of the pavement. A man-at-arms lowered his lance to stick him, but the dwarf gained his feet with incredible rapidity, and dashed headlong into the crowd, which closed around him with a roar of oaths, laughter and mob-cries, with now and then a tone that rose to the octave of menace against the bishop and his suite. But Achon only smiled grimly as he gave some orders to his followers, and two of them detached themselves, as if to pursue the dwarf, whilst the rest rode onwards.

Not once had Achon looked in our direction, and yet I knew and felt that we had been seen and recognised by him, though for the present that mattered little. He was evidently on his way to the palace, and we halted for a moment to let the crowd clear, and watched the cavalcade until it turned off to the right, and vanished from our view.

"If the dwarf lives through this 'twill go hard with Achon," said Marcilly.

"If he lives!" I answered; "hark at the crowd roaring after him."

And from the distance we could hear the yells of the mob, as fickle as the breeze, now joined in hounding down the dwarf, whom but a moment before they had closed round in protection.

"They'll have him to a certainty!" said Marcilly. "I would we could have saved him."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. It would have been madness to have drawn swords then with the enterprise we had in hand. We could not deviate from our course, but I was not satisfied with myself, and rode in silence, until we saw "the Emperor's Pistols" grinning over the gateway of the house in the Rue Parisis, and drew rein before the prison of Condé.

An archer guard was at the gate, and a little way from the men Monsieur de Bresy, the same gentleman who had destroyed my house in Paris a year back, and who was now in charge of the Prince, stood patting the neck of a grey horse from which he had just dismounted. He flung the reins to a groom, and turned to us.

"Good-morning, gentlemen! I address Messieurs De Marcilly and De Vibrac, do I not?"

"The same, monsieur," and we bowed our greeting as we dismounted.

"I was at the palace last night, and saw you, as well as heard your names there," said De Bresy, as if in explanation of his recognition of us. And then he added: "I fear, M. de Vibrac, you owe me no goodwill for what happened in Paris. I give you my word, however, that I could not restrain the men ——"

"That is quite possible," I answered, and then checking myself, for it was no time to quarrel, I went on, "we have made our peace at last. We have come here, however, to pay our respects to His Highness."

"Had you come an hour ago it would have been useless, but as it is I shall inquire if the Prince will receive you. I was sent for to the palace this morning, and informed that the Prince would be allowed henceforth to see a few friends daily—you are, I presume, of the number?"

"Monsieur, and if there is any doubt on the matter, perhaps this will satisfy you," and Marcilly held out the signet.

De Bresy glanced at it for a moment without showing any surprise: "It is more than enough," he said, and then as he looked again at Marcilly: "But for the weather that has touched your cheek, monsieur, and that you do not stoop so much, 'twould be hard to distinguish you from Condé."

We laughed, and I put my hand on Jean's shoulder, saying:—

"You see here, monsieur, 'The Shadow of Condé'."

"I shall take care," was the reply, "that I do not mistake the shadow for the substance; will you enter, gentlemen?" and with these words he motioned us into the doorway now opened by the guard.

In the courtyard we were stopped for a few seconds, and De Bresy went off to announce our coming. When he went out of earshot I remarked:—

"Did you hear what De Bresy said, that he would take care not to mistake the shadow for the substance. Think you he suspects?"

"It is impossible to say. You must keep him engaged the whole time when the stroke comes off to-morrow."

"Why not to-day?"

"If it can be done to-day I'll risk it; but there may be suspicions, and 'twould be well to let them sleep."

"Remember," I said, "that as soon as ever matters have been explained to the Prince I leave you. I have to do that ride to St. Loup to-day."

"You are the best of friends," he answered. "But hush! Here comes De Bresy."

In effect De Bresy appeared at the moment. "His Highness will receive you, gentlemen—have the kindness to follow me," and he led the way. We observed everything that was possible as we went, noted the number of sentries in the corridors, counted the steps on the stairs, marked the thickness of the doors and how they were secured, until at last we reached a landing, where there was an officer and four men on guard. Behind them was an open door, and looking into the room beyond, we saw three or four figures seated round a card table, early in the day though it was. They were the Prince and his immediate attendants, Vaux and one or two others. Condé saw us almost at once, and, in cheery greeting, waved a hand holding some cards, his voice as joyous and hearty as if he had never known a moment's grief, as if he did not know that within a few hours his neck might lie upon the headsman's block. He was a true Bourbon, and the Bourbons, with all their faults, were never afflicted with the poltroon fever.

"Welcome!" he cried; "come, give me all the news." And, flinging his cards on the table, he rose and took us by the hands. Except that he was pale and thin with his confinement, he seemed as much at his ease there, with death hanging over him, as if he were receiving us in his own château of Germiny.

We met him in the same spirit, and spoke in general terms of a hundred things, De Bresy, who remained in the room, joining in the converse. At last I caught Marcilly's eye, and succeeded in arresting De Bresy's attention for a moment, by raising a discussion on Touchet's system of fence. I showed him the Spanish pass, and, when the little play was over, had the satisfaction of seeing that Jean had been able to make known at least the object of our coming.

As I sheathed my sword the Prince said, "Bresy, these gentlemen dine with me to-day; I trust you will honour me with your company as well".

The archer bowed and expressed his thanks, and, seeing that we were staying practically for the day, begged leave to excuse himself, as he had to do his rounds. As he was at the door Condé called after him:—

"At twelve exactly, De Bresy, and we will play a match at tennis in the afternoon. I wager ten écus that Marcilly here beats you. Will you take it?"

"With pleasure, monseigneur," and, bowing, De Bresy went.

The door was still open, but that did not matter, for we gathered round the card table, which we pushed near the fireplace, and as we pretended to play, Marcilly, in a few rapid words, explained our plan. It was only, however, when we came to the point that the Princess was awaiting him at St. Loup that Condé spoke.

"*Oui-da*," he exclaimed, "I would 'twere La Limeuil."

Marcilly bit his lip, and I for one did not hesitate to show my feelings. The callous indifference displayed by the man we were about to risk so much for moved me for the moment to hot anger. I actually dared to curse him in my heart, I, who in a short time was to be guilty of a crime to which the Bourbon's sins were white as snow. Condé, however, was quick to see the effect of his words. He laughed his merry laugh. "Ah!" he said, "I but jested, my friends. Once out of this," and his eye flashed, "I will draw the sword openly, and by God's grace, France shall be free."

The matter passed off, and Marcilly went on, explaining his plan to the end. When he had finished Condé, who had said no word since that untoward interruption of his, leaned back in his chair, tugging at his moustache. We had expected him to say something, but not a word did he utter, not even a phrase that was suggestive of thanks for the sacrifice that was being made; and at last it was with a voice that almost trembled with anger that I asked:—

"Monseigneur approves of the plan, I trust?"

"It is impracticable," he said shortly. "Come, let us go on with the cards."

We looked at one another in astonishment. "Does not Your Highness intend to make any effort?" I went on. "And how is this impracticable? We at least deserve to be told that."

He had picked up an ace of hearts, and was looking at it as I spoke. When I finished, he laid it down face upwards on the table, and looked at us.

"Messieurs," he said, gravely, "it is impracticable, because, for such a plan to succeed, Louis of Bourbon must be base enough to buy his life at the expense of another's — and — he has not yet come to that. Messieurs, if this were the only way, and I had to die ten times over, I would not take it. Let there be an end to this. Your very offer is an insult to me!"

To say that we were thunderstruck is nothing. Here was an aspect of the case that had never presented itself to us. We looked at each other blankly, and as we looked the gong in the courtyard below struck the half-hour after eleven.

There are moments when a lie becomes almost sublime, and one of those moments had come.

"Monseigneur," said Marcilly, "you are under a misapprehension. My safety is assured in any case— it is pledged."

I turned to him, but the expression on his face stilled the inquiry on my lips, and I waited and wondered, whilst the Prince said drily, with that touch of sarcasm in his words from which he could never divest himself:—

"Indeed! By the King himself, perhaps?"

"Monseigneur can judge for himself," and Jean held out the signet of the King.

Condé took it in his hand for a moment, and his glance shot out at Marcilly like a sword blade; but the features of the other remained immovable and calm.

"I believe you, monsieur," he said, as he handed back the signet, "and I place myself in your hands. Forgive me the words I have just spoken."

For a moment I, Gaspard de Vibrac, had thought that my vengeance on that heartless coquette was about to escape me.

PART X.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARIE.

"WHAT! Do you not stay for dinner?"

It was De Bresy who spoke as I was mounting my horse. He was leaning over the parapet that crowned the gateway, and looking down at me with a curious, suspicious glance in his eyes.

"No!" I answered carelessly, as I gained the saddle. "I am due at the palace this afternoon, and have made my excuse to His Highness. By the way, you have later news than I, monsieur—does the King's improvement continue?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "'Tis said he had a good night."

"May it lead to many better! *Au revoir!* I trust you will win your match at tennis."

"Would you care to lay anything on Marcilly?" asked De Bresy, with a gambler's eagerness for a wager, and I humoured him.

"Another ten to the Prince's, if you like," and I steadied my fretting nag.

"Done with you!" he replied, and so wishing him the day once more, and taking one of the Swiss with me, I trotted off, outwardly calm, but inwardly a prey to a hundred conflicting emotions.

I had just left two men, one of whom had done a generous thing, whilst the other had performed a great and noble action. In realising that in this they had gone far beyond me, so strangely was I constituted that I felt a jealous anger at the thought of their nobleness. In soul I had already sunk so low that I began to hate anything that was good, or rather to think that I hated it, and this, in effect, is the same thing. Yet, with all this, I saw my own fault. I felt that I was wrong, and almost despised myself. Even then I had a chance—up to the last moment I might have saved myself, but for that mad longing for revenge on the woman whom I accused in my heart of having brought me to this level. There are those who will say I was beside myself, that no one, short of an idiot and a fool, could have jumped to the conclusions I had done; that the thing was, and is, impossible. My answer is, that it was just because I was beside myself, it was just because I was blind and frenzied with my own passions, that I did what I did, and, I may add that, in my opinion, all such crimes as mine are due to the same cause, to the temporary mental paralysis that makes one unable to follow the right path. It is only necessary to look around, and a hundred such instances may be seen—none, perhaps, so black and damning as mine.

With these conflicting emotions in my mind, I was going across the square of Ste. Croix, when I once again met Achon and his suite. They were evidently returning from the palace, when we crossed each other, coming almost face to face, and this time Achon greeted me, saying as he did so:—

"Monsieur! A word with you, with your permission."

"It cannot, I imagine, be to seek alms for the poor," I answered, with a sneer—I wished the man to know that I was aware of the part he had played in the Rue des Lavandières. But his face remained immovable as he looked at me coldly, saying:—

"It was not only to seek alms that I was in the Rue des Lavandières — there were other things I wanted—some I got ——"

"Stole, rather! That list of names! Those ——"

"Letters," he interrupted, still with that cold smile on his face; "they were even more interesting than the scroll. Bah! Monsieur de Vibrac! I thought better of you. I little imagined you could be the plaything of a coquette!"

I winced at the words, and he went on, "Such women as that take the soul out of a man. They should be destroyed like vampires."

"Is this all you have to say?" I asked unsteadily, as we rode side by side slowly down the Rue Jeanne d'Arc.

"No, monsieur, events are moving more rapidly than I thought, and it becomes necessary for us to move with them."

"Indeed!" I replied, "I see not how the matter concerns me."

"Is your memory defective?" he asked, with a sneer.

"On the contrary, it is peculiarly retentive." There was something in my voice, low as it was, something in the words, that had a convincing effect, and Achon appreciated the position. His tone and manner changed on the instant, and it was with a cat-like, caressing purr that he said:—

"Your pardon, De Vibrac! The old Adam comes out in me too often, I fear, long and painfully though I have borne the cross ——" but, still hot with resentment, and the thoughts he had inspired, I interrupted him.

"Monsieur, I am pressed for time."

"And so am I," with a quick, almost imperceptible change to his former manner. "You have not forgotten our little agreement."

"I have already said that my memory is retentive."

"Ah! You men of war are like flint and steel." The shadow of a smile flickered over his thin, red lips. "I but recalled you to that promise, monsieur, because I would like it fulfilled to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes. A few hours sooner or later can matter little to you."

"Not a rush! When and where?"

"An hour after compline, in the priory of the Jacobins. You know it?"

"There will be no difficulty in finding it out."

"And you will come?"

"Yes," I answered slowly, and then leaning forward he touched me slightly on the arm.

"I will return you those letters there if you do what I want. They are useless to me—but to you ——" And he simply looked at me, the unspoken sentence in his eyes.

I felt my heart beat at his words, but said nothing, and Achon continued:—

"You will be punctual, monsieur—a good day!"

And this strange man rode on, leaving me a prey to a hundred emotions. For a moment I held my horse reined in, and then turning, rode on towards the palace.

On entering the gates I found the courtyard crowded, and there was evidently an unwonted commotion; but I stopped to make no inquiry, and, dismounting from my horse, gave the trooper the reins, and walked up the steps, feeling with my hand at my breast pocket to discover if the letter Marcilly had given me was safe. It was there; but the touch seemed to burn me, and dropping my hand I joined the throng at the main entrance.

So great was the crush that at first I could make no way; and leaning against a pillar cast about to see if there was any one I knew who would conduct me to Madame de Marcilly. Not a face could I recognise, until at last I saw Lorgnac a few yards from me. As often happens in a crowd I had looked at the spot where he was, ten times before, without noticing him, and then his face flashed upon me as if he had sprung from nowhere. He caught my eye as I looked, nodded and smiled, and finally I edged myself to his side, and we exchanged greetings.

"There is something more than usual going on to-day, is there not?" I asked.

"I believe news has come that has fluttered the dovecotes here a little. All sorts of rumours are afloat. They say that Coligny and the Huguenots are in arms, and that the Constable, with ten thousand men, is marching to cut off our retreat to Paris."

"Ha! The usual stories when no one knows anything, I suppose."

"Nevertheless, there is something afoot—and Richelieu swears they mean to hasten the execution of the Prince."

"Richelieu! He would be likely to know."

"Probably, but I never trust Richelieu. He appears to have fallen into some sort of disgrace since last evening, for De Bailleul is on guard at the Council Chamber, and I know that he was refused an audience by the Queen-Mother this morning."

"I could explain that, I think, were there time; but, monsieur, I have a favour to ask. I have an important letter to deliver to Madame de Marcilly. Can you tell me where I could find her?"

He laughed a little as he answered, "I'm afraid I'm not much of a squire of dames, and hardly ever know the order of the day for the ladies-in-waiting. Madame is, probably, with the Queen-Mother, or, perhaps, in the gallery, overlooking what we call the Queen's Terrace."

"*Diable!*" I exclaimed, with an affectation of cheerfulness, "I know no more of this place than if I were a blind man in a labyrinth. How am I to find her?"

"I'll guide you as far as I am able," he said, good-naturedly, and thanking Lorgnac, I followed him as he made his way slowly through the crowd, and eventually into the corridor through which we had passed the night before when seeking Catherine's Cabinet.

When about the middle of the corridor Lorgnac stopped before a door.

"This will take you into the gallery," he said. "You will find little Créquy in waiting at the other end, and he will tell you more than I can. I never venture there, so now say *au revoir!*"

With a word or so of thanks for his kindness, I put my hand to the door, and passing through it found myself in the gallery. It stretched along a wing of the palace overlooking a terrace laid out as a garden, which hung over the cloisters of the courtyard beneath. I had scarce taken ten steps when a little burst of laughter came up to me from the terrace, and with it my own name pronounced in a woman's voice. Glancing out through the window, I saw, seated on a rustic bench immediately beneath me, two ladies, wrapped in long cloaks, for the day was cold. The one was La Limeuil, the other the woman over whom my life was wrecked. I stood for a moment watching them, scarce knowing what I did. I have said watching them—it was only on one of them that my eyes were fixed, and as I looked on those clear-cut, delicate features, the limpid blue eyes, and the rippling flaxen curls that escaped from her silken hood, all the love I thought was gone came back, and I stood there, trembling, and all but unable to move.

That face could never have played the traitor! No! I had misjudged it. I was wrong, a hundred times wrong. It was not for me to bring sorrow to those eyes so honest and true—I, who had escaped but by a handbreadth from shadowing them with eternal sorrow. In that moment I forgot my vengeance, forgot all. I was only conscious of the fact that I was near her. I rested my hand on the marble balustrade and looked. I would draw back. I would hold fast by the vows I had sworn to myself on that night when I spurred from the gates of Paris, leaving, as I thought, my sin behind me; and even as my mind worked so, the other woman, Isabel de Limeuil, spoke, and speech and answer struck me like a blow on the face.

"As I was saying, I saw him, your old friend, De Vibrac. Is it true that he weds Favras' daughter, that little Yvonne de Mailly?"

Marie de Marcilly opened and shut the gold stopper of her vinaigrette, as she answered: "I neither know nor care. Monsieur de Vibrac's affairs do not interest me in the least."

But the other was not to be denied, and with the feline cruelty of her sex she thrust in a pin.

"He adored you once—did he not?"

Marie laughed. "Whoever can remember a year back? The trifling of an hour passes with the hour, and one forgets it with one's old gloves, or a worn-out mask."

I caught my breath. It was true then! Achon's words—the thoughts that had come to me last night—were they not true—proved to the very hilt? But I would have measure for measure, and, waiting to hear no more, I drew back, the hot blood burning within me.

How little did I know that complex thing—a woman! I judged her from the standpoint of a man, forgetting that a woman never speaks out her whole thoughts, perhaps because she herself does not know what those thoughts are, perhaps because by her very nature she can never have complete self-knowledge, and so remains a sphinx to man, and a mystery to herself.

I walked slowly up the gallery, hurt, wounded, all the savage in me roused. I had half a mind to turn on my heel, to see her no more, to give Marcilly's letter to the nearest page to deliver to her, and to ride back, leaving her to her fate. When what was to happen was known, the avarice of Achon, the fears of Catherine, and the ferocity of the Guise would show no mercy—and she deserved none at my hands. Why should I move a finger to save her, this woman who could kill a man's soul? And so, as I brooded, the tempter to whose counsels I was ever a ready listener whispered again in my ear, and I almost laughed as the infernal plan developed before me like lightning. Yes! There was a sweetness in the thought of such a vengeance that filled me with an unholy joy. From that moment I was lost—I had come forth from the gates of the temple, and the doors were shut behind me.

Near the end of the gallery where I had halted was a stairway leading down to the terrace below. I made a step towards it, hesitated, and then boldly descended, as I reached the last step coming face to face with the two, who had risen from their seats, and were walking along the terrace.

We bowed to each other formally; Marie did not give me her hand, though the colour left her cheek, and her companion glanced from one to another of us with a slightly malicious look, as if enjoying the situation; but I gave her little for her satisfaction, for, drawing my letter forth, I presented it, saying calmly:—

"From Monsieur le Comte, madame, and I have besides a message for you."

"I thank you, Monsieur de Vibrac," she answered, whilst Mademoiselle de Limeuil, catching the meaning of my last words, cut in: "It is my hour for attendance, I believe—you will excuse me," and with a little nod and a smile she ran up the steps leaving us together.

Ay! Even as I stood there watching her, the letter in her hand, and her eyes turned to me with a mute inquiry in them, I would have spared her but for the cruel words still ringing in my ears; and burning as I was with rage, I was overawed by her beauty, and stammered as I went on blundering:—

"I should not have come, I know, but Marcilly himself charged me with this message."

She lifted her eyebrows slightly and laughed. "I see no reason why you should not have come, monsieur—will you permit me?" and she made as if to open the letter. She was so cool, so calm, so utterly self-possessed, that it brought me to myself. She had forgotten the old glove—well, so could I. The past was dead. I was given to understand that, in the subtle, indescribable way that only a woman can, and I took my cue. Her hand was on the seal to break open the letter when I arrested her.

"One moment, madame—perhaps you had better hear my message before reading the letter."

"Is it anything serious? Nothing has happened to Marcilly?" I winced at the eager ring in her voice.

"Nothing has happened, but what I have to say is serious enough;" and then, as we walked the length of the terrace and back, I put the matter to her, talking as if we were but acquaintances; and as we stood once more at the steps she said:—

"Monsieur, I will meet you in two hours' time on the parvis of St. Pierre."

"That will do—but be well mounted, madame—we may have to ride." I bowed as I took my leave, but this time she extended her hand, and touching it with mine, I left her there. As I walked up the steps I could hear the crackling of the paper as she tore open the seals of her letter; but I would not trust myself to look again. When I had gained the corridor, I could find no trace of Lorgnac, so, after a glance around, I strolled leisurely out, and mounting my horse rode in the direction of the Martroi, going by the Escures, so as to pass St. Pierre on the way.

I was still smarting from the effects of the words I had heard. My mind, unhinged and incapable of reason, took a sullen pleasure in recalling them, and in anticipating the payment I would exact for my tortures. Wrapped in these thoughts, I took no notice of anything around, and had come opposite St. Pierre without observing it, when I heard the grating voice of Richelieu.

"Monsieur de Vibrac!" and he had steadied his horse alongside of mine.

"As you perceive, monsieur," I answered coldly, a fierce joy swelling in my heart at the thought that here was one, at least, upon whom my pent-up wrath could break.

"You were good enough, monsieur, to observe last night that you would like to hear a word from me."

"Now, if you like," and I looked him full in the face.

"Nothing would suit me better but for the Edict, and there are a dozen or more of Monsieur de Cipierre's bees about who would soon interrupt us."

"You would rather not go on then?" I inquired with a sneer, and his brown cheek flushed.

"On the contrary, but the place is inconvenient. Would to-night suit you? There is a full moon."

"Nothing better; but I must ask you the favour of making your time fit in with mine, as I have an engagement to-night."

"And so have I, but at a somewhat late hour. Would nine suit you?"

"Excellently, monsieur, and there is good ground behind Ste. Croix, I believe."

"I know a better spot, the garden of the Jacobins. We shall be safe from interruption there."

I started slightly at the words, and noticed, too, that Richelieu observed me, for he looked at me keenly as I answered:—

"As you please, monsieur; but will it not be necessary to pass through the priory to get to the garden?"

"There is a door opposite the inn called the Red Rabbit; you cannot mistake the sign. Be there on the stroke to nine, and knock thrice. It will be opened to you."

"I shall not fail."

"And I trust, monsieur, our conversation then will be agreeable to you."

"It will be more agreeable than this, I have no doubt—your servant, Monsieur de Richelieu."

We lifted our hats to each other, and parted as politely as if we were two friends giving each other the day. As I rode down towards the Martroi, I could not help wondering to myself at the strange coincidence, that both Richelieu and Achon should have chosen the Jacobin priory for our meeting. There was certainly something behind this, perhaps treachery to me; but come what may I was determined to keep my tryst. I was like a bear that had been baited to fury. I was strong as a bull, and had had a sword placed in my hands ere I was ten years of age. I smiled grimly as I rode under the lions above Cipierre's gate, thinking to myself that Richelieu was likely to find our conversation more interesting than he imagined.

Once in the house I made a hasty meal, and then went to see in what condition my horse was—the one

I had used this morning having been borrowed from Cipierre. I found my nag looking sleek and fit for work, and, giving orders to have him saddled in an hour's time, sought the great hall and flung myself into a chair near the fire. Marcilly was with the Prince. Cipierre was still at the palace, and I was glad of that. I was disinclined for company. I could not have borne to speak with any one then; I could not even think, but sat before the fire nursing my fury. At last the time came for me to start, and with a message that I would, perhaps, be late, I rode out, this time alone.

Marie was already before St. Pierre as I came up. She looked pale and nervous, but her voice was firm, as she replied to my apologies for not being there to receive her.

"You have not kept me waiting at all; I have but just come," and then she went on: "It was with the greatest difficulty I got away".

"We had better not delay a moment," I answered, and putting our horses to the trot we went forwards at a rapid pace. Up to the time we were free of the gates we did not exchange a word, and the silence continued for a short time after, as we galloped along the winter road; but at last we reined in, to give our horses breathing space, and then she spoke.

"Monsieur," she said, "I feel I ought to thank you for what you are doing. Believe me, I shall remember this."

"As long as an old glove or a worn-out mask," I said bitterly, and she flushed scarlet.

“You speak in riddles, and I am not good at guessing. She swung her jewelled riding-whip impatiently in her hand, and it was as much as I could do to restrain myself from telling her I knew all now, every detail of the treachery by which she had lured me to love her to madness, and led me on to make sport for herself and her companions. But I held myself in. I could afford to wait, for my time was coming.

“Your pardon,” I said. “I am afraid the past year has not improved me. I have changed much in heart and feelings. I am no longer a boy.”

“Indeed!” The whip went up and down again. She was determined to have no allusion to the past, and, fool that I was, I was blundering into it more and more at each moment. “Come, monsieur!” she went on, “another half-league and we shall almost be at St. Loup,” and touching her horse lightly on the shoulder with her whip, she galloped on, I following at her heels.

We were well in the forest by this, and the early winter's night was coming on apace. From the damp and sodden ground a grey mist had arisen, and brooded sullenly over the earth. Through the opal shadows which quivered uneasily around us, the trees held out dim, skeleton arms, to which here and there clung a few withered and yellow leaves. But the sky above us was clear, and augured a fair night, and as I looked up at it I had a grim satisfaction in thinking that there would be no cloud shadows to spoil the Spanish pass, to which I fully intended to introduce Monsieur de

Richelieu. We had now slackened pace again almost unconsciously, and madame asked:—

"How far is it now?"

"Not a quarter of a mile," I said, a little surprised, because I thought the road was as well known to her as to me.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "is not that the château?" and she pointed with her riding-whip to where a vast, irregular shadow loomed between the mist and the trees.

"Yes!" I answered, and at that moment madame's whip somehow slipped from her hand and fell to earth, where it lay with its jewelled head flashing, for all the world like a snake.

She uttered a little exclamation, and, dismounting, I picked up the whip and handed it to her, her gloved fingers touching mine for a moment. And then, I do not know how it was, but I stood there by the side of her horse, and she, playing with the handle of the whip, said in her low, sweet voice:—

"Monsieur, I hear that you are to be married. If it is true, will you permit an old friend to wish you all happiness?"

The blue eyes looked down upon me kindly; there was a smile upon the arch of her lips. I had seen the temptress so before, leading me on, but though I tried to steel myself my heart began to beat, and my voice trembled as I answered:—

"The story is not true, madame; but I thank you for your good wishes."

"I am sorry," she answered; "I had hoped it was true."

The time, the hour, the drawing power in her glance, was bringing me to her feet again. Could I not free myself from this Circe who looked so innocent and pure, and yet could pitilessly destroy? Was I again to dance for her amusement? I tried to speak. I meant to say something bitter, but blundered into a hopeless—

"I shall never marry".

She smiled now, and even through the mist I could see the pink on her cheek, as she bent forwards and laid her hand lightly on my shoulder.

"Come, Monsieur de Vibrac. You must get over this."

The hand was still on my shoulder. The touch thrilled through me. I was hardly conscious of what I said, but I slipped back a year, and pleaded madly for her love. Only a few words escaped me; they were enough, however, and she stopped me, white and trembling.

"Monsieur!" she said, "you are mad! How dare you!"

"How dare I!" I repeated. And then the memory of the words I had overheard on the Queen's Terrace came back to me, and in unmanly, bitter anger I cast them up at her.

I can see it all now: the red light of sunset broadening through the mist, the bare tree trunks burning like copper, the outlines of the château growing more solid and defined, and the figure of Marie before me. I had stepped back a pace as I spoke in my anger, and she had half-turned her horse's head towards me, listening with blazing eyes as I finished my cruel speech.

I know now that what she said was to cure me of my madness. I was fool enough to believe then every word she spoke in her hot anger.

"So you accuse me of playing with you, monsieur. You refuse to believe that a woman may have strength to save herself from being lost. You cast up in my face what I had buried, what I hoped had passed from my life for ever. Well, let it be so—I wanted amusement, and you afforded it to me. You are right—I think no more of you than of an old glove or a worn-out mask."

With that she turned her horse's head, and, striking him smartly with the whip, galloped off in the direction of St. Loup.

PART XI.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRIORY OF THE JACOBINS.

It was true then, and my worst suspicions were confirmed. Out of Marie's own lips was she convicted twice over, and had I been struck across the face with her riding-whip, the sting, the smart, would have been nothing to the intolerable pain her words inflicted upon me. I lost all power of reason. All power of thought left me. For a space my mind seemed numbed and paralysed. I looked dully around on the purple haze and the still, silent trees, listening, I know not why, to the beat of her horse's hoofs, as the sound grew fainter and more faint, until at last it died away in the distance. I might have stood there for a half-hour, with a mind in which all things were blurred and dark, save for that one thought of revenge, burning like an evil star through the chaos of gloom in my soul. At last, with a bitter oath, I remounted and rode back to Orleans, giving my horse his head and the spur, seeking in his speed some relief for the torment in my mind; essaying, in short, to perform the impossible, and to flee from myself.

To this day I have no recollection of how I passed the city gates, of when and where my horse slackened pace, and I only realised that I had come back when the beast stopped of his own accord under the snarling lions over Cipierre's gates.

When I entered the hall I found the Vicomte there pacing backwards and forwards with a disturbed and anxious air. He almost started as he saw me, and asked in a breath:—

"Has anything happened? You are as white as a ghost—where is Jean?"

In my heart I cursed my tell-tale face, but answered, calmly enough:—

"Nothing has happened. Marcilly is with our man, as far as I know."

"And you did not stay?"

"I had other work. I escorted Madame de Marcilly to St. Loup. She is now with the Princess."

"Oh! They have made a mess of things," he burst out. "I am certain that Catherine knows where the Princess is, and at the first check will hand her over to the Philistines."

"But there has been no hitch up to now."

"*Mordieu!* Do you know that this morning we were within an ace of losing our heads?"

"Indeed! What happened?"

"There was a council this morning, a hurried, sudden council, to consider the Constable's move. The Guise was not there. He refrained from coming; but that Red Phalaris, the Cardinal, urged the hastening of his bloody design."

"The execution of Condé?"

"Yes. He and his creatures wanted it done at once. Sancerre and myself protested. He then threatened us with a like fate. There was a stormy scene; but the Chancellor stood firm. My God! He is the one honest man in France! A Prince of the blood was not to be dragged to death like a common malefactor, he said, in flatly refusing to affix the great seal to the decree. Then the Cardinal played another card. The safety of the kingdom was above the law—that was the point he pressed, and I believe he would have won, but for the sudden news that the King had been taken with a seizure, and commanded the instant presence of Catherine and the Chancellor."

"A move of the Medicis to delay things."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not; but it has given us breathing space. The Council is adjourned until to-morrow afternoon. As he left Charles of Lorraine turned to Sancerre and myself, saying that to-morrow he would produce such evidence that, seal or no seal, the Prince would die, and he added with his sinister smile, in company, too."

I thought of my compact with Achon, but merely said:—

"So they want another Amboise."

"But we will baulk them yet, I hope. I have sent a trusty messenger to the Constable urging him on no account to delay, and Sancerre has fled."

"Sancerre gone!"

"Yes; an old fox knows how to guard his brush, and we both had warning enough."

"But you, monsieur," I asked, "do you stay or go?"

He looked up at me, for all the world like an old boar at bay, and laughed harshly.

"I—go! No! If it comes to the worst I have sixty tried men at my back. This house is strong and amply provisioned, and if I have to die, it shall be sword in hand on my own hearth."

As he finished the bell in the courtyard clanged out the hour. It was already seven. Cipierre spoke again at the last stroke.

"I am going my rounds. Will you come with me?"

I, however, excused myself, and waited until I heard him ride out with his guards. Then summoning Badehorn, I gave him a short note to Marcilly, informing him briefly that his wife had reached St. Loup.

"Give this to Monsieur le Comte yourself, and say that I will be late to-night. And, Badehorn, when you have done this, ride straight to the Château de St. Loup and await me there."

"Monsieur!" and I was once more alone. I had still a little time on my hands before the hour of my tryst with Richelieu fell due. I went to my room, changed my attire, and then made a pass or two at the grotesque head of a griffin in the corner of the mantelpiece of my chamber.

I was curious to see if I still remembered Touchet's favourite thrust, and I found I had not forgotten the master's teaching. The movement came as cleanly, as easily as in the days when I was wont to practise it for hours together before a mirror, until even I myself could not see the swift turn of my wrist or the point of my blade; and I laughed a little in my heart as I thought of this, and of yet another advantage that I had—I was a left-handed man.

Then, taking my hat and cloak, I went out on foot to find the sign of the Red Rabbit. I inquired, of course, for the Jacobin priory, for twenty would know that for one who might even be aware of the existence of the tavern. I found my information readily enough, and at a little past eight was before the priory, which rose into the clear night, grim and dark behind its high, spiked boundary walls. Except where one faint ray of light glimmered through a narrow window, making a pale green streak on the screen of ivy around it, the façade was in total darkness; but I could see little from where I stood, except the upper portion of the building, which was set far back in what appeared to be a large garden—the surrounding wall shutting out all further view. I remained for a moment looking at the vast irregular outline of the priory, here white in the flood of the moonlight, there in deep, almost solid, shadow, and, but for that faint light playing upon the ivy, one might have thought that the black robed brethren had fled, leaving their home to the bat, the owl, and the spectral things of the night.

The road in which I stood was long and narrow. On one side, almost for its whole length, extended the grey line of the priory wall. On the other hand, a jagged row of irregularly built houses crowded one

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above the other, their gables sharper, their pentice roofs sloping more steeply than ever in the weird moonlight. Not a soul was to be seen, and the sound of my own footfalls came to me with sullen echoes, as, loosening my sword in its sheath, I proceeded in search of the inn, looking well to the right and left, for if ever a place had "cut-throat" written large over it, this was the spot. At last I saw a lamp burning before me, and coming up to it, became aware that I had reached my destination, for beneath the light swung a white sign-board, with a red rabbit painted thereon. The road, too, came to a dead end here, and before me rose the crenellated city walls, cutting off all further progress; whilst beyond, no doubt, was the river. I crossed over to the other side, and found the little door Richelieu had described almost where the priory wall joined on to the ramparts of Orleans. Then, having some time to wait ere it struck nine, and as it was useless hanging about the deserted street like a prowling cat, I entered the inn.

The room was comfortable enough; a cheerful fire was burning. There were tables, benches and chairs, and a couple of lanterns gave sufficient light; but there was not a soul within.

"Strange!" I thought to myself. "Is the place plague-smitten?" Then I called out, and from behind a buffet, where he had been sleeping, a man rose, and said civilly enough:—

"Good evening, monsieur! I did not expect you so soon."

"*Diable!* You know me!"

The host, for it was he, shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "It is simple; Monsieur de Richelieu said that a friend of his would be here to-night, and I made a guess."

"A shrewd one, too." I wondered to myself what Richelieu meant, and if I was the person expected. Then looking around me, I remarked: "Your house does not hum with business, my friend".

"It hums enough for me. Messieurs of the Carabiniers reserve it entirely for themselves and their friends."

"What! And you refuse all others?"

"Oh, no, monsieur! But it is bad for the others when messieurs are here."

"I see. Are none of your friends here to-night?"

"Oh! They will come later, about ten o'clock or so."

"*Tiens!* They are late birds," and, wishing to end the conversation, I ordered some food and a bottle of Vouvray; then, taking my place near the fire, I sat down to my supper. Mine host tried once or twice to draw me into further talk; but finding his efforts useless, left me to my own devices, and returned to his slumbers.

I ate but a little, but sipped my wine and began to brood once more over my wrongs; and the sullen anger within me again blazed up fiercely. I thought of Marie; but it was no longer with love. For her sake I had cast aside all that a man holds dear. She had made me dance like a marionette for her amusement, and then—dismissed me with a few cutting words, careless whether she killed my soul or not. Such a thing was a monster, unfit to live, a scourge that it would be righteous to destroy; and, God forgive me! I had sunk so low then that I was prepared to go any lengths to satisfy the unholy craving for revenge for which I thirsted.

Now holding my glass to the light, watching the beads chase each other in the wine, then sipping the Vouvray slowly, I went over my plan. Yes, it was complete in every detail, and I gloated over the joy that was to come to me when I repaid my debt. As for Richelieu, he was but an interlude—I hardly gave him a thought. I was sick and sore at heart when he crossed me, and had flown at him like a mad dog. If he won, well, there was an end of things. If I won, I was no better pleased than before, and yet so great was my inward torrent that I almost caught myself wishing that Richelieu's blade would find my heart.

At last! After an interminable wait, in which the minutes lagged like hours, I heard the compline, and, awakening the host, paid him his score.

"Monsieur does not wait, then, for the Captain?" he said, as he pocketed the coin I gave him.

"No; but perhaps I may return. Good-night."

"Good-night, monsieur."

It was clear that I had been mistaken for some one else, and then I remembered that Richelieu had mentioned that he had another appointment. The matter, however, concerned me not, so I banished it from my mind, and, coming out of the inn, I found myself in a few paces at the little door Richelieu had described. I looked for a knocker. There was none, so, drawing my sword, I tapped three times lightly with the steel hilt. A moment after it opened softly, and a tall figure stood before me. It was Richelieu.

"You are punctual, monsieur," he said, coldly polite, as he stepped back to let me enter, and carefully closed the door behind me.

I found myself in a garden within a garden. In front of me rose the dead back wall of the priory chapel, with its one pointed window in darkness. On my right was the moss and lichen-covered rampart. On my left, shutting us out from the main garden, was a wall, thick with ivy that glistened in the moonlight. We were, in short, in a little square, admirably suited for the purpose to which we were about to put it. The foothold was sure, the moon perfect, and in that white band of light between the two walls there were no cross shadows to spoil a thrust or baulk a parry. As I looked around me the key turned softly, and Richelieu, removing his hat and cloak, placed them under the lee of the wall. I followed his example, and then, with God's moon looking down upon us, we stood before each other, death in our hearts. I was facing the chapel wall, my back to the door by which I had entered and as Richelieu took his place opposite to me I was about to call out "on guard" and commence the assault out of hand when he spoke:—

"My sword is, I think, longer than yours, monsieur. I have another here of the same length as mine. Would you care to use it?"

It was unlooked for civility, but my heart was hardened against the man, against all men, and false myself, I was only too ready to believe all others as I was. That other sword might be but a yard or so of soft iron that would buckle in my hand, and I answered with a sneer:—

"I will make up for the shortness of my blade by the length of my arm. I trust my own steel only."

"On guard!" was the sharp answer, and the two blades came together with a little crash. In the moonlight, bright and clear as day, I caught a strange smile on Richelieu's face as he saw me use the left hand for my sword. He, of course, remised at once, trying to pink me in tierce, and the sparks flew as I parried and returned high up at his throat, but my thrust was met by a master, and then he laughed, as he sprang back a yard, and in an instant had changed his sword hand, and I, too, was face to face with a left-handed man. I saw at once the disadvantage at which I was placed, and grew hot with anger as Richelieu mocked me.

"I also can use the left hand, monsieur, but it brings the heart too near the point," and he ripped me just over the heart at the last words. I do not know why, but I felt that he had spared me, and, sick with anger and shame, flew at him like a tiger-cat, putting forth all my cunning of fence, and he began to give slowly to the assault, but always with that strange, half-mocking smile on his face. He was giving ground, nevertheless, and I worked him in a half-circle from his original position, pressing him closer and closer each moment, fiercely, but warily withal, and at last the chance came. His blade seemed to yield to mine. It was now or never. I made the feint in tierce. He took the bait, and then, with all my strength, I gave him Touchet's great thrust—and the next moment was disarmed.

Ay! At that instant I thought I had reached his heart, his blade had twisted round mine like a snake, and with a turn of his arm, from the elbow to the wrist, he dragged the sword from my fingers, with such force and strength that it struck with a little clang against the rampart wall, and then, rebounding, fell white and glistening in the moonlight at our feet.

We faced each other for a moment, and then he dropped his arm, and the hot shame surged to my forehead.

"End it," I said thickly, but he laughed.

"There is yet time for another bout." He stooped and picked up my sword, saying, as he held it out to me, "I will say that there are scarcely three men in France who could have met that thrust—take your sword, monsieur".

Consider for a moment in what state I was. I was half-mad with the tension of the past days. I had meant to kill this man when I came here, to kill him for a few trifling words; and in my heart I felt I was doing him the honour to let him die by the sword of Vibrac. And what was the result? I found myself, for all my vaunted skill, a child in his hands; and he, the despised soldier of fortune, the man on whose fame there were a hundred blots, stood here giving me my life, and, what is more, giving me a lesson in perfect knighthood.

I could not speak. My hand closed like a vice on the hilt of the sword Richelieu held out to me; but the cold steel itself was warm to my icy clutch. I stood before him, a curse trembling upon my lips, and a hundred evil passions hissing like snakes at my heart. Richelieu did not understand. He spurred me with a gibe.

"Come, monsieur! Or are we to have a new phrase instead of the Fever of St. Vallière?"

I was stung to the quick. "You shall die for this," I gasped, and he laughed once more as our blades crossed, and then—a dark shadow fell between us, and a stern voice cried:—

"Hold! What fool's work is this?"

We turned to the sound, and before us stood Achon, his face gleaming like ivory above his black robes; but it was not he who arrested our attention, whose look froze the words of defiance upon our lips. It was that other figure, a little behind the priest, taller by a head than any of us, with a purple scar on his cheek, and a sombre fury burning in the eyes, that held us spell-bound with their power. His was the voice that had arrested us in our devil's work. He it was upon whom we gazed. Ay! I have known brave men, men to whom death was nothing, men who played with life as a child with a ball, yet never one so hardy as to stand without flinching before The Guise in his wrath.

"The Guise!" stammered Richelieu; but I said nothing, looking at the sinister figures before me. And at Richelieu's voice a grim smile passed over the Duke's face.

"Messieurs," he said, "your memories are short. Have you already forgotten Du Charry? Is an edict, but a week old, to be made waste paper?"

We knew what he meant, and there rose before me a vision of poor Du Charry, whom Guise had hanged at his own gate for the very offence of which we were guilty, and the prospect of a like shameful fate sent a shiver through me. I am certain, too, that we had never escaped but for the dark schemes the Duke was weaving in his brain. Du Charry was only an idle brawler. He killed his man, and his own gate-posts made his gallows; but we—we had our use at present, and that—it was nothing else, I am sure—saved us from the hangman. We made no answer to Guise; but Achon whispered low to him, and he spoke again.

"Put up your swords;" and, with a cynical frankness, "it is well for you I have need of you at present. Remember, however—I hold this against you."

We did as we were bidden, Richelieu with a slight, almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, and a look at me as if to say "another day," and as my sword went home in its sheath Achon turned to me.

"Monsieur," he said, "you have found your way here more easily than I expected, and before your time. Perhaps, however, it would be as well to get to our business now."

The hour for which I had waited had come at last.

I had longed for this, thought over and planned out all I meant to say. It had become as familiar a thing to me as the sword by my side. And yet, so strange was my nature, as Achon spoke, as my revenge came within arm's length of me, I lost all the thread of my scheme. I hesitated and faltered.

I can see it all now before me: the square of dazzling moonlight, the grey walls of the priory, with that one faint light burning in a distant wing. Achon was facing me, and his white face would have been like that of the dead, but for the starry eyes and red, cruel lips, on which there played the flicker of a smile. Richelieu stood glancing from one to another of us, swinging his plumed hat in his hand, and a little on one side towered the gigantic figure of Guise.

And now I spoke, fencing with the thing that was to be.

"I understand, monsieur, that the Chancellor and the Cardinal were to have been present."

"Things have changed, Monsieur de Vibrac." It was Guise who answered me, not Achon. "The Chancellor will not be here, and as for my brother of Lorraine—well, I stand in his place."

I bowed. "And monsieur!" I looked at Richelieu.

"Remains," said Guise, briefly; "proceed!"

I knew I had that to tell which would give me the revenge for which I thirsted; but the words would not come. Something held me back, perhaps the last feeble effort of my good angel. It still fought within me, though the battle was lost; yet for a moment it seemed that it might prevail.

"Monseigneur!" I said, "it was arranged that the Bishop of Arles was to make certain statements which I was to corroborate if I could—nothing more!" The words seemed to give me relief. I had spoken of this to Marcilly. There was no betrayal here.

"That is so," said Achon, "and it is as well that Richelieu remains to bear witness to what passes, especially as your friend Ponthieu has escaped, and my fools bungled over the letter we wanted," and then, without more ado, he detailed briefly what we know, confining himself exactly to the facts, but skilfully bringing them home against Condé. When he had done, Guise turned to me.

"You bear witness to this as correct?"

"Monseigneur."

"You have heard this, Monsieur de Richelieu?"

"I have, your Highness." Something in the Carabinier's voice made me glance at him; but his face was like stone.

There was a little silence, and then the Duke said:—

"He is a lost man—nothing can save Condé now."

And Achon laughed long and low to himself. What ran in his mind, what fancy moved him to a joy that chilled us, I know not; but the high chapel wall echoed back that mirthless chuckle, as though some fiend flitting above us shared in his secret thoughts, and rejoiced in his fearful gladness.

We looked at him in astonishment and amaze, but at last he put his thin hand to his breast as if to stay himself, as he asked me:—

"And have you nothing else to say, De Vibrac?"

"Is more wanted?" It was the Guise who spoke, with a touch of impatience.

"Ay! There is more, monseigneur," and Achon again turned to me. "Do you remember, De Vibrac, that I told you before, you had trouble there?" And his hand rested again over my heart as it had done for a moment at Larçon, and dropped on the instant as he continued, "Here is the clue that led me to read you. Here are the letters I promised you. Take them—but you have more to say, Vibrac. Am I not right?"

What hideous prescience possessed this man! My thoughts came thick and fast upon me, and, as I thought, his eyes seemed to read into my very brain. I tried to steady myself.

"You know I have more to say!" I said. "Are you a sorcerer?"

"No, monsieur; but a priest to whom secrets come. And they laugh, monsieur, they laugh at De Vibrac, and the sport he has made for ——" He stopped; but he had said enough. I would not have heard him if he had spoken more. The place, the hour, all before me was changed. I was once again listening to Marie's mocking words; and all the horrors of the past were upon me. They laughed. Did they? I would turn their smiles to tears of blood, and then—I spoke.

It was more than they expected to hear. My first words made even Guise start, and Achon's lips, red as a wound, to pale to grey. But I was getting my revenge. I could not think of anything but that, and at last it was over, and I stood before them the basest of men.

Not a word did they say in interruption or comment; but when I had done they left me where I was, Richelieu still a pace or so from me, leaning on his sword and twisting his moustache with his hand. After a while, I know not how long it was, for my mind is almost a blank when I strive to recall those moments, they returned, and said something to Richelieu, to which he answered simply with a bow.

Then they turned to me where I stood, a drumming in my ears, a dull, aching pain at my heart; and Achon's voice came to me as from a far distance. He was speaking to Guise: "You see, monseigneur, that his attempt to join the Constable is open war, and will utterly damn him. Let him reach St. Loup, and we have the whole hive, queen-bee and all." Then he turned to me.

"Monsieur de Vibrac! You will not speak of this to a soul. Go on as before. Let none suspect you. Take the Prince to St. Loup to-morrow. We will bring him back, and then ——" he began to laugh again; but Guise checked him.

"Let this end," he said, and addressed me. "You have your instructions, monsieur, and the reward will come." So saying, he took Achon by the arm, and they passed out through a door in the wall that separated us from the main garden.

I looked after them stupidly, my mind still dazed and blurred, and a shame to which all other shame was as nothing throbbing through me. I turned to Richelieu, I know not why, and he stepped back a pace, as he would have from some foul thing.

"Monsieur," he said, "our other meeting cannot take place. Even you must know why. Monsieur! I have been in many lands, I have seen strange things, good things, and evil things; but—so help me, God!—I have never yet seen a thing so evil as this—I have never yet seen man fall so low as you. The key is in the door, monsieur; and you will find the street dark enough even to hide your shame."

With this he left me, following the others, and I, the mean, the abject, staggered towards the door like a drunken man, and, like the evil thing I was, flitted through the night.

CHAPTER XX.

A QUOTATION FROM VIRGIL.

I HURRIED on, utterly careless whither my footsteps led. Richelieu's speech burned within me, and my very soul shrivelled under the fierce light he had poured upon it. I saw myself in all my infamy. I cursed, again and again, the coward heart that had not nerved my hand to strike him dead, as he flung at me those bitter words of insult and scorn. But a guilty conscience makes a craven soul, and the lesson was brought home to me, as with blanched lips and trembling limbs I went on, keeping in the shadow, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Now and again I met a few passers-by, but, night hawks or honest men, they left me the road, until at last I would have been glad if one of them had even drawn upon me.

Finally I reached the Martroi and gained my chamber in Cipierre's house. Alone there, I tore the letters and the glove into shreds, and cast the fragments into the fire; then I flung the sword that had served me so ill to a corner of the room, venting upon the senseless steel some of the fury in my heart, and, undressing, lay down to sleep. But no rest came to my hot eyes, and I spent the weary hours counting the diamonds on the lattice window, watching the moonlight fade into darkness, and listening to the sighing of the wind, which rose with the setting of the moon, and gave promise of a day as grey as sorrow.

I did not rise till about the dinner hour, eleven o'clock, and when I descended, I found the Vicomte and Jean awaiting me. I was surprised at my own self-control. During the hours of the night, my heart had as it were steeled itself within its guilt. All sensations of regret or remorse were numbed and paralysed. I thought them dead. All that lived within me was a burning hate against those whom in my madness I accused of bringing me to the pass to which I had sunk, and so I gave my traitor hand to both Cipierre and Marcilly, and sat down to eat with them, cordial and even gay. I had some right to be gay. In a few hours my revenge would be complete.

At last the moment came for us to start upon our perilous enterprise, and we stood at the door ready to mount, a couple of Swiss with us. There was no "good-bye" said. To all intents we might have been making our daily visit to the Prince; but Cipierre's hand lingered in that of his nephew, and when he took mine in his clasp, he gripped me like a vice in his excitement.

"Once free, you will ride hard, De Vibrac," he whispered.

"Trust me for that, monsieur!" and, springing into the saddle, I followed Marcilly into the street.

The promise of the dawn had been fulfilled, and there was a dense fog in the air, blurring the outlines of the houses, and making the figures of the passerslight fade into darkness, and listening to the sighing of the wind, which rose with the setting of the moon, and gave promise of a day as grey as sorrow.

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The promise of the dawn had been fulfilled, and there was a dense fog in the air, blurring the outlines of the houses, and making the figures of the passers-by loom like indistinct shadows. In truth, it was difficult to see two yards ahead, and Marcilly, as he held his hand out before him, said:—

"If it keeps like this, and we bring off the stroke, you will get out of Orleans without a question being asked."

"De Bresy sticks in my mind," I answered. "He never leaves us. I begin to fear he more than suspects."

"We have provided for that in part. Whilst you were away, we arranged that the Prince should pretend to be suffering from a chill, and keep his bed."

"Yes."

"Well, I will go in and see him, and as I take the Prince's place you and Vaux must settle with De Bresy. Vaux knows his part and you must not fail."

"A man will not cry out if a dagger at his throat commands silence," I answered; "he will be killed at the first sound he utters."

"Not that if you can help it, Vibrac."

"That is De Bresy's affair," I replied, and with these words we came to the gate of the house in the Rue Parisis.

The same formalities in regard to our entrance were observed as before, and leaving the horses outside with the Swiss, we walked into the courtyard, where De Bresy met us.

"That was an unlucky match at tennis," he said, as he greeted us; "the Prince has taken a chill, and keeps his bed."

Our faces showed nothing but the utmost concern.

"He is not bad, I trust?" asked Marcilly, adding, "have you seen him?"

"Oh, yes! 'Tis but a chill that will pass off in a few days, unless ——" and he hesitated.

"Let us not speak of it, De Bresy; we know what you mean," and the archer swore under his breath, muttering something as we entered the corridor, followed even here by the fog, which filled the galleries and rooms of the prison with its blue, semi-opaque vapour.

"I never remember such a fog in Orleans," said Marcilly, and almost at the same time I spoke myself:—

"How went the match, De Bresy? You remember our wager?"

"You lost by a stroke; but we are to play another match; would you care to make it double or quits?"

"Take him, Gaspard," laughed Marcilly; "double or quits on the next match we play. You will lose, De Bresy."

"I take the wager," I smiled, catching the hidden meaning in Jean's words, and we found ourselves on the landing before the Prince's apartments, the door of which was, however, closed. The subaltern officer was on guard there, and De Bresy addressed him.

"How is the Prince, Comminges?"

"Vaux tells me he sleeps, but that if these gentlemen came they were to be admitted, as the Prince desired to see them."

"We can wait in quiet in the anteroom," said Marcilly in a low voice, and then De Bresy led us in.

Vaux, the Prince's page was alone in the room, building a house of cards at the table. He looked up as we entered, put his finger to his lips, and whispered:—

"He sleeps still".

"Does any one watch by him?" asked Marcilly.

"No," replied Vaux, "but shall I arouse Monseigneur? He desires much to speak with you."

"Better that he slept. I shall, however, go in and sit by the bedside until he awakes. I will not disturb him in the least." So saying, Marcilly gently pushed open the door leading into the bedroom, and passed within.

Vaux, with a careless sweep of his hand, knocked down his house of cards, and as he gathered the pack together, looked at us, saying:—

"Shall we take hands, messieurs, to while away the time?"

"With pleasure," replied De Bresy, "but three is an unlucky number. Comminges shall make the fourth."

He turned to the door as if to call out, and Vaux bit his lip with anger as he just flashed a glance at me. I was, however, in time.

"It is needless, De Bresy. I cannot touch a card to-day. I know not what it is, but I have no humour for it."

"Oh, come! But a few rounds," said De Bresy, as he turned to me, picked up some cards, and began shuffling them in his hand.

Whilst he spoke Vaux had made a movement towards the window. He was behind De Bresy now, and his poniard gleamed in his hand. I held him with a look, and De Bresy went on, all unknowing of the danger behind him :—

"'Tis a curious pack this, Vibrac. Do you see the illuminations on the backs of the cards?"

"Yes. I noticed them before. They are Viterbo cards, I think."

Vaux had made a step nearer his man. His eyes were blazing. I could not have stayed him if I would; but at that moment there was a noise at the door, and the page had just time to turn to his window like a flash, when Comminges entered the room.

"Monsieur!" he said bluntly, addressing De Bresy, "here is a letter for you."

"Thanks, Comminges," and, as De Bresy took the letter, I glanced at the soldierly figure of the lieutenant. It was evident that he was one who had risen from the ranks, and twenty years of war had left their scars on his rough features. There he stood, the type of the soldier who has become a machine, whose life is regulated by his orders, and as I took in the square jaw, the firm, resolute features, and keen, deep-set eyes, I thought to myself that it would be a far cry to the gates of the prison even if De Bresy were disposed of. And as my mind ran on thus, a low exclamation burst from De Bresy. He crumpled the paper in his hand, saying as he did so :—

"There is no answer, Comminges".

The subaltern bowed stiffly and withdrew.

"It is infamous," said De Bresy, as if to himself, and then he caught my eager look and Vaux's glance

—the page had turned from the window and approached us when Comminges spoke. His hand, however, no longer held a poniard.

"There is nothing new against the Prince?" I asked, and De Bresy laughed uneasily.

"Monsieur of Arles writes to me to prepare the *cachot* for our prisoner to-night."

"The *cachot!*"

"Yes. 'Tis a dog's business, and but that my honour is pledged, I would see it to the winds—a Prince of the blood in the *cachot!*"

A sudden thought struck me as he spoke. It was one of those inspirations that come in moments of suspense.

"But you surely have no *cachots* here?"

"As good as in the Châtelet, monsieur."

"I saw the Vidame there," I said, "and know the Châtelet. I doubt if what you have here is anything like that."

"Would you care to see for yourself? I have the key here," and De Bresy pointed to his side, where at his belt a large key hung attached to a thick silver chain.

"Well," I answered, "it will kill some of the time we have to spend here, waiting for the Prince to awaken. Will you come too, Vaux?" And as I glanced at the page my eyes told him to say "No". He was quick to grasp this; but he was also a good actor, and he hesitated a moment before replying.

"I think not, monsieur. I shall await your return here."

We left him, card-building once more, and stepped out where, after a few words with Comminges, De Bresy led me through the corridor, and stopped before a small, iron studded door. Beside it, in a niche, a lantern burned, and taking this in one hand my companion opened the door, and as it swung back creaking, he pointed downwards with his key, saying:—

"*Facilis descensus Averni*".

I laughed as I looked down the black passage, with its old and worn steps. I laughed because I thought it would be for me to finish the quotation; and then I followed De Bresy as he picked his way downwards. Twice were we stopped by doors, each of which he opened with his master-key, and each as it opened disclosed a stairway, darker, more hideous than the one before. And now we found ourselves in a small landing, facing yet another door.

"We have come," said De Bresy, putting down his lantern as he used his key again. He had to push twice at the door before it went back on its hinges with a sullen groan, and before us lay a dungeon which all but matched the *Chausse d'Hypocras*, that fearful prison den of the Châtelet.

"Does that satisfy you?" asked De Bresy, as we gazed on the damp and dripping walls, where the drops of water oozing from their surface flashed like gems in the ruddy light of the lantern. Even against myself I shuddered.

"To put him here!" I muttered, and De Bresy, catching the words, spoke again.

"You will judge better if you step within. Except just outside this door not a voice could be heard, call it ever so loudly."

I wanted a moment to think, and did as I was bidden. The next instant the door closed behind me with a crash, and I was in total darkness. Outside I heard De Bresy laughing, but it was as the laugh of a man coming from a far distance.

I staggered back blindly, and my groping hands felt the wet and slippery walls; and then on the instant the whole horror of the thing seized me. Tricked! Cozened! Trapped like a fox! With a curse I flung myself at the door and battered it with both hands. I might have tried to tear down Notre Dame with my fingers. In those moments I lived years. I was bursting with shame and mortification. No long-eared ass could have walked into a pitfall more easily than I had done. And then I heard De Bresy's voice again, and the door slowly swung back. As the light fell on me, he rocked in senseless, foolish laughter.

"Ye gods!" he almost screamed, "I did but try you, De Vibrac. You are as white as a sheet."

I came out slowly and laughed myself, a harsh laugh that rang back from the vaulted roof.

"'Tis a sorry jest, monsieur, and one for which you must answer me."

He simply bowed, my tone had sobered him, and turned towards the lantern. Ay! The fool had given me the key to my difficulty in his idle jest. Quick as thought I was on him, but he turned like a wild cat at me, and for a moment we grappled together. Backwards and forwards we swayed. I heard the key he held fall with a clash to the floor, and he caught at my wrist, for my hand was at his throat, and he tugged vainly to free himself.

He was sinewy as a leopard, but it would have been a strong man who could have stood against me then, and I held him like a vice. Even by the dim light of the lantern I could see his face grow livid, his lips blue, and his eyes almost start from their sockets. He struggled like a fish in a net, poor wretch. But at last his knees went from under him. Slowly, slowly, he yielded, and I felt him limp as a sack in my arms. One effort, and I flung him from me through the open door of the dungeon, and heard him fall with a half-smothered cry. He lay there like a log, and closing the door after him, I picked up the key and turned the lock.

Then I waited in the silence, slowly arranging my disordered dress. When I had finished, I lifted up the lantern, and as I did so heard a faint cry:—

"Open! Open, De Vibrac!"

There were a hundred agonies in the voice; but he had made me pass through them before. I laughed in my turn at De Bresy, as I repeated and finished his quotation:—

"... *Facilis descensus Averni:*
Sed revocare gradus superasque evadere ad auras,
Hoc opus, hic labor est".

PART XII.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SHAME OF VIBRAC.

EVEN as the words fell from my lips, their other meaning flashed upon me in vivid, insistent light, and the mockery I flung at the poor fool, there battering at the door with frantic hands, rebounded upon me with double force. It was I—I, whose steps could not be retraced—it was I who was held prisoner in shades to which the darkness of that dungeon was sunlight.

And with this thought came the first sharp sting of remorse. But I had burned my ships. I could do nothing. Whether I stood fast to my evil compact with Achon or held back, the result would be the same. Those whom, in my madness, I had betrayed were compassed on all sides. For them there was no escape. And there was none for me. My path was before me; onwards, where my revenge held out a Tantalus' cup, whose sweetness would never touch my lips. I put aside the thoughts that came crowding upon me in that stifling air, and seizing the lantern, went back alone, whence we had come two together.

As I shut the first door I stopped to listen if any sound could be heard from the dungeon, but all was silent. Slowly I went upwards closing the doors after me, and at last reached the landing. Fortunately there was no one there. I replaced the lantern in its niche, locked the door carefully, and slipping the key in my pocket, made my way back to the Prince's apartments.

De Bresy was disposed of for a time. Luck and his own folly had favoured me in that, but there still remained Comminges to be dealt with.

I walked along the corridor, whistling the "*Rappel d'Aunis*," and found the lieutenant on his eternal guard. The man never seemed to eat or sleep. He looked at me from under his bushy eyebrows as I came up, and asked, in his gruff, brusque way:—

"Where is Monsieur De Bresy?"

"He is busily engaged at present."

"Engaged! Monsieur has done his rounds."

"Probably he has business in connection with the letter you gave him, monsieur." And then, to avoid further inquiry I began questioning him myself.

"Can you tell me if the Prince is stirring?"

He glanced towards the door, which was closed on account of the chillness of the day, and shrugged his shoulders; but I went on, as if time was no object to me.

"Marcilly has not gone, has he? He said he might have to go early."

"Oh! He is here still."

"You are sure?"

"As I am here. There is only one way out—

through this door—and I have been here since you came."

"You have long hours."

"There is an old proverb, monsieur, 'fast bind, safe find,'" and he again shot a keen glance at me.

Clearly it seemed that Comminges was on the alert. But too much caution often overreaches itself, and I took heart from the thought, as I rubbed my hands together, saying, with a little shiver:—

"Ugh! It's cold here; and the fire in the room there is crackling cheerily."

Comminges said nothing, but as I slipped into the room he followed me; not so fast, however, but that I was able to exchange a nod with Vaux, who had to turn aside to hide the blaze of eager curiosity in his eyes.

From within the inner room there came a low murmur of voices.

"So he is awake," I said, and Vaux answered:—

"Yes. He has been awake for the last quarter of an hour."

"Then I shall go in," and I tapped at the door. A weak voice replied, "Enter!" and as I made a movement forwards I saw Comminges at my heels.

"Monsieur," I said, "this is His Highness's bedchamber."

"I am aware of that," he answered grimly, "I desire to inquire after his health."

The suspicious ring in his voice was not to be mistaken, and it was absolutely necessary for me to have a few minutes alone with the Prince and Marcilly.

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Knowing the class from which Comminges sprang, I at once chose my line of action.

"Monsieur de Comminges," I said kindly, "it is a Prince of the blood who lies there, prisoner though he be. Even Monsieur de Bresy does not visit him without notice, and I am sure that least of all would you, a gentleman and a soldier, intrude upon him. Perhaps I had better announce you. It will not delay you above a minute or so." I looked at him steadily as I spoke, and the very gentleness of my tones made the reproof harder. He flushed under his tanned skin, and drew back a little. It was enough; and, without awaiting for his answer, I stepped in, closing the door upon Comminges.

The room was in semi-gloom; the curtains of the bed were drawn, and within it lay a figure covered to the ears with rugs. Another figure sat by the edge of the bed, and the fitful flames of the fire burned redly through the uncertain light, half day and half night. As I entered the watcher by the bed rose to his feet, and I whispered quickly: "De Bresy is safe, Marcilly," and then Condé, for it was he, began to chuckle, and I saw my mistake. "Your pardon, monseigneur—the light deceived me."

From within the bed came a hacking cough.

"The poor Prince has a bad cough," said Condé, as he shook again with silent merriment; but I stopped him—there was no time to lose—and whispered quickly what we know, merely stating facts and going into no details.

"Let Comminges enter," said Condé, when I had ended, adding: "He would be flattered if allowed to watch by His Highness."

I nodded, and moved towards the door; but the Prince stayed me.

"A moment!" he said, and stooping over the bedside he whispered something in Marcilly's ear, pressing his hand in good-bye. Then he rose and turned to me.

"I will admit Comminges. Stay here and keep him engaged until I slip out."

With these words he moved forwards towards the door, leaving me by Marcilly, the friend whom I had betrayed to his death. I stood there, shame and remorse in my heart, and tongue-tied with my own infamy. I dared not address a word to him, but kept my face averted. I heard the door open softly, and Comminges step into the darkened room. The Prince moved backwards into the shadow of the door, as if to let him pass, making a little motion with his hand towards the bed. As the heavy footfall of the lieutenant fell on the floor, and his huge spurs jangled, Marcilly broke out again into his cough, and turning uneasily on one side, closed his eyes, as if in sleep.

"He is bad," I whispered to Comminges, as he came up to the bed; "much worse than I thought."

The lieutenant looked at me and then at the figure before him as I continued in the same low tone:—

"Monseigneur is touched by your kindness in coming. The cough has exhausted him, but as soon as he recovers he will speak to you."

"I had better have René sent for," he began.

"You would be wise, but there is no immediate hurry, and the Prince wishes to thank you in person for coming. He will recover himself in a moment."

He was about to say something, but I saw that Condé had got out of the room, and staying Comminges with a gesture of my hand, I pointed to the still figure on the bed.

"He sleeps, I think. Sit here beside him, monsieur," and I indicated a large easy-chair by the bed. "The slumber is fitful, and he will awake in five minutes."

Comminges hesitated for a moment, and then accepted my invitation. We waited in silence for a little, listening to the heavy breathing of the sick man. Finally I spoke again in low, subdued tones.

"Marcilly and I are going now. May we send René in to you?"

"It will save time," he answered, and bending over the sleeping figure I cast a look at Jean. Then I gave Comminges my hand in adieu, and putting my finger to my lips to enjoin silence, stepped out on tiptoe from the room. As the door closed behind me I saw Condé and Vaux together, and the latter's face was all smiles. I took the key of the *cachot* from my pocket and handed it to the page.

"You can give this to Comminges in an hour's time, with the compliments of monseigneur," I said, "and you might add that Monsieur de Bresy is, perhaps, in need of some fresh air."

"How on earth did you get him there?" began the Prince; but I interrupted him.

"I will tell you, your Highness, as we ride—let us not delay now."

Vaux would have dropped on his knee to say farewell, but Condé restrained him, taking his hand in a warm clasp.

"*Au revoir!*" he said, stepping towards the door, and, as I followed him, I called out, somewhat loudly, "Make our compliments to the Prince, Vaux, when he awakens".

The next moment we were in the corridor, and, walking together arm-in-arm discussing the Prince's illness, we passed slowly out, receiving the salutes of the sentinels. In the misty courtyard we ran no risk of discovery, but at the gate itself there was some slight danger. The sergeant of the guard was there, so we called him up to us, and I placed a brace of gold crowns in his hand.

"From Monseigneur the Prince," I said, "for you and the guard to drink the King's health."

"And the Prince's, too," was the answer, whereat we laughed, and, wishing him good luck, passed him. He had seen Marcilly and myself on our entrance. Our going out was in the natural course of things, and the fog and the chink of gold disarmed suspicion.

Outside we found the horses, and, mounting them, rode slowly off, followed by the Swiss.

As we entered the square of Ste. Croix I reined in, and, calling the Swiss up to me, said to them:—

"Go and await us at the palace gates. If we are not there in an hour, you may return home and tell the Vicomte."

They were men to whom orders were orders, not things to be questioned. They simply saluted and rode on, grey shadows in the mist; and then I said to the Prince:—

"Now, monseigneur!"

He was leaning back in his saddle, straining his eyes through the yellow fog back upon the Rue Parisis.

"If they touch a hair of their heads," he muttered, "they will never forget the vengeance of Bourbon," and he turned to me as I pressed him again with another reminder.

"Come, De Vibrac! You are right. Let us hasten."

We put our horses to the trot, slipping through the dim day like ghosts, down the long streets where the houses loomed on each hand like phantom buildings, through the straggling Portereau, and at last, freeing the gates, gained the open country.

Condé rode a little in front of me, his hat pulled over his brows, the collar of his coat well turned up, and his head held down. We went on in silence, for it was not a time for talk.

When we passed the city gates a little breeze sprang up, lifting the mist, and blowing it along in billows that chased each other like the breakers on a sea-bound coast. The sun, which had hitherto burned dully through the fog, a great orange globe of fire, now began to cast its clear light upon the landscape. As the cheery beams fell upon us, Condé awoke from his torpor of thought and slackened the steady canter at which he was going to a walk.

"Come!" he said, "we are not two monks of La Trappe. Tell me, Vibrac, how you disposed of De Bresy? How you put him in a cage? Oh! They will laugh! They will make verses about him!" he went on, breaking into laughter himself.

But I was in no mood for mirth or talk. I wanted to get the business over, and I said gravely:—

"Monseigneur! It is a long story, and the Constable is far. I pray you, let us hasten on! No one knows what danger may lie within these woods." And I looked to the right and to the left of me, where the sunlight cast its swords of flame into the shivering, uneasy mist; down the long glades which the bright rays carpeted with gold, and behind the tall and tangled brushwood that hid the winter-stricken tree-trunks. I almost hoped to catch somewhere the gleam of a breastplate or the flash of a sword. The sooner things were over the better. But no! For all I could see, we might as well have been on some desert island in mid-ocean, as on that desolate and unending forest way.

Condé had followed my glance, and noticed the grave tone of my voice.

"*Pardieu!*" he said, "but you are a dull dog!" And then, in his quick, impulsive way, he stretched out his hand. "I did not mean to offend you. Ah! Monsieur! Believe me! I thank God that He has given Louis of Bourbon such friends as you."

I could not touch his hand. I was not so base as that; and I felt my face burn as I saluted him, saying, with a voice that shook, despite my efforts:—

"Monseigneur! Let us hasten. Every moment is full of peril."

He did not understand my confusion; but he waved an airy farewell towards Orleans.

"Free! Free!" he exclaimed. "Thank God and my good friends! Come, Vibrac!" and we galloped on again, black care on my shoulders; but he, he the betrayed, was happy as a lark in spring, and as we rode through the brightening day he broke into song, his voice, mellow and rich, echoing through the ringing woods.

Each joyous note stabbed me like a knife, as I thought how soon that song would be changed to a wail of lamentation. In the crowd of thoughts that surged upon me, my confused brain fluttered hither and thither, like a netted bird seeking chance for escape. It came upon me to warn the Prince whilst there was yet time, to stop him, tell him what I was, and bid him ride to the Constable's camp for dear life. But that would not save the others! Alas! The pitfalls were too surely dug! And then the shame of it choked me. I could not. I dared not; and so I let the precious moments pass.

And now a momentary strength came, and I nerved myself with a mighty effort. It should be done, come what may! With a gasp I called out:—

"Monseigneur! Monseigneur!"

He turned and reined up, following my example, looking at me with curious eyes as we halted, facing each other. But somehow I could not speak. I made an effort, hesitated, and stopped, looking helplessly about me.

"What is it, De Vibrac?"

"I thought some one was lurking here," I said desperately, to gain time as I peered into the woods.

Condé bent forwards and took a pistol from his holster.

"Perhaps I was foolish to sing," he said, and began to look too.

But there was nothing, and as I gazed I became aware that we were on the spot where I had parted from Marie. I could almost see her before me, her eyes flashing, the jewelled whip swinging to and fro in her hand, and her lips curled in scorn as she flung her taunts at me. Once more her words rang in my ears, and rang with them the death-knell of my resolve. Loyalty, honour, an unsullied name, all these I had sold to my evil desires, and should I not be paid? No! I would not go back. I would have the price of my soul. I would have my revenge, betide what may! I made a movement as if to go on, saying:—

"There is nothing. I was mistaken."

"I think not, Vibrac. Hark!" And as Condé spoke, from within the dark woods a horse neighed shrilly. I felt on the instant what that meant, and answered hurriedly:—

"'Tis from St. Loup. See, monseigneur!" And pointing before us, a little to our left, I showed him the face of the château with its two pepper-box towers rising above the trees.

"To think I should not have noticed it!" he exclaimed. "Why, we are almost there!"

"We will be there in ten minutes," I answered as we trotted forwards, my eyes here, there, and everywhere, seeking for those who were to take part in the final scene that would give me my desire.

But there was nothing; not a leaf stirred, not a branch crackled, though I knew they were around us, and I rode on cursing the delay, for as the moment approached I was worked up to a fever heat.

In effect it was not quite ten minutes before we saw the mouldering walls of St. Loup. The gates lay open, and we galloped through them, and along the deserted ride, the reckless Condé giving forth a loud "halloo!" to announce our coming. As he did so, something made me turn and glance back over my shoulder. Under the arch of the avenue I could still see the gate, and at its entrance stood a single horseman gazing after us. But now the ride bent sharply to the right, and I lost him to view as we took the turn, and followed the curve that swept in a half-circle to the doors of the château. But brief and momentary as my glance was I had recognised the figure. There could be no mistake. It was Achon himself.

We drew rein at the entrance, and a man hurried up to hold our horses. It was Badehorn, and he bent forwards and kissed the Prince's hand ere he took the reins. And then I heard a glad cry, and Condé, springing from his horse, ran up the wide steps to meet a slight, grey-clad figure that fluttered towards him, with arms held out, and the love-light shining in her eyes.

"Safe! Safe! Oh, thank God!" Her arms were round his neck, as she hung over him with tender, wifely words of love—but I cannot write of this. I did not dare to look, but with head held down and shaking hands, fumbled nervously with the straps of my nag's girths. Now, too, all those who were there gathered around, and it seemed as if the steps were full of figures. There was a murmur and buzz of welcoming voices, as some one—it was Coqueville—put an arm through mine with a warm pressure, leading me on until I found myself near the Princess. She took my hand, that lay as cold as ice in her own warm palms, and faltered:—

"Oh, monsieur! God bless you!" With this all speech seemed to fail her, and she burst into an April shower of glad, happy tears.

But I shivered and shrank back from the words of praise, and the kindly faces that crowded round me, and then I felt a light touch on the sleeve of my coat, and a slender figure was before me, pinning with trembling fingers a bunch of winter violets to my coat. It was Yvonne de Mailly, and the girl's face was flushed, and her sweet eyes wet with tears.

"Monsieur!" she said, "we women are proud of a brave man." And then she stepped back, amidst the surrounding smiles, and I turned with a sob in my throat, for my eyes to fall on Marie, where she stood a little apart, gazing at me gravely, and as the sun lit the gold of her hair, and I caught the look on her face, my mind went back like a flash to the vision I had seen in Russy wood, and I stood there tongue-tred and staring, as without a word she turned aside from me.

The tumult of feelings raging within me almost choked me. My mind travelled with lightning rapidity from remorse to a savage, relentless fury, from the deepest pity to a stony apathy. It came to me once, as we entered the house, to draw my dagger and plunge it into my own heart, and on the heels of the thought followed another. There was no one here who knew, and Achon and Richelieu would perhaps be silent. What mattered it to the priest how he gained his end as long as he did gain it? And as for Richelieu, bandit and ruffian though he was, he had shown me a stately courtesy when my life was in his hands, so I leaned upon the self-interest of the one and the chivalry of the other, and held myself in.

We had gained the hall by this. Twice had I felt rather than heard Coqueville speaking to me. At last he put a hand on my shoulder, and shook me gently.

"*Mon ami!*" he said, "do you dream?"

"Ay!" I answered, my hand to my forehead. Then, with a sudden rush of feeling I could not control, "Coqueville!" I said, "take them away at once. Delay not here a moment. There is danger—danger, I say."

My voice was harsh and high. The words arrested all, and the Princess began nervously:—

"Yes. Let us go! We are quite ready."

"And so are the horses in the inner court, madame," said Coqueville; whilst Condé, reckless and gay, slipped his arm round his wife's waist and kissed her. "Fear not," he said, "Vibrac has sniffed danger the whole way. Not a soul suspects ——"

And a single shot rang sharply through the air.

We started, even I, so suddenly, so crisply did the sound come to us through that winter day; and then another and another followed it, but from the other side of the house.

"What is it?" And Marie, who had flown to the window, turned with a white face to the Princess's cry.

"We are betrayed! The place is full of men."

Before she finished speaking, we heard the galloping of horses—they seemed to come from all sides—then the brazen ring of a trumpet pealed harshly out, and there was a hoarse command.

"Guard all the doors! Let none pass!"

With a snarling oath, Coqueville sprang to the doorway, sword in hand, and I rushed after him. Condé would have followed us; but loving arms held him back, and with a strength that one could hardly believe she possessed, the Princess almost dragged him towards an inner door.

"Here! here!" she gasped, "there is a way here—ah!" And she shrank back, for the door had opened upon her, and a man reeled in, mortally wounded. It was Badehorn.

"We are lost! They are in the courtyard!" So saying, he slipped down limply, and in the hour of his death became a child again, and went back to his native tongue, groaning out some words, as he died, in his gutteral German—God knows, they may have been prayers.

And while this happened in a handturn, there came an angry knocking at the door, and a loud voice called:—

"Open! Open, in the King's name!"

The surprise was complete, and we were caged as securely as rats in a trap. Condé looked at the blanched faces of the women, then at us, and then glanced from the window, whilst the knocking grew angrier, and the voice louder.

"Open, in the King's name!"

Then he bent down, gravely this time, and kissed his wife again, and as she sank weeping into his arms, he said calmly to us:—

"Open!"

But Coqueville hesitated, and the Prince had to command him twice before he sullenly drew the bolts, and, opening the door, stepped back to my side; and in a moment there was the jingling of spurs, the clash of scabbards, and the room was thronged with armed men, at the head of whom stood Achon, and by his side was the tall figure of Richelieu.

Condé, his arm still round his wife's waist, a little group of scared faces behind him, stood in the centre of the room, proud and dignified. I had moved back a pace from Coqueville, somewhat into the shadow. Now that the blow had fallen, I was dazed, bewildered; my mind seemed a blank.

"Monseigneur!" and Achon made a slight gesture of his hand behind him, "you see, resistance is hopeless."

"None has been made," answered Condé drily.

There was a little silence, and then Achon turned to Richelieu.

"Their swords, monsieur!"

Coqueville was the nearest. As Richelieu approached him, he said:—

"Monsieur! Your sword, in the King's name."

"It came from a King, and it goes to a King, monsieur," and Coqueville obeyed, handing his sword to Richelieu, who received it with a low bow. Then he glanced at me, a secret scorn in his look; but Achon's voice cut in sharply:—

"His, too, monsieur."

Richelieu shrugged his shoulders, and called to a trooper:—

"Truchepot—take monsieur's sword—my hands are full."

All eyes were upon me; the contempt in Richelieu's voice was not to be mistaken. Achon looked on with a mocking smile on his lips.

"Monsieur!" I began; but Condé's voice stayed me.

"Vibrac! Not a word, I command you—give up your sword."

I let it fall with a clash on the floor, and as the trooper stooped to recover it, acting on some secret signal, two others ranged themselves one on each side of me.

"Come, monsieur! Let this farce end. Where are you going to take us?"

It was Condé who spoke, and Achon answered him.

"Back to the Rue Parisis, monseigneur—and if your Highness will give me your faith not to attempt escape, I have no wish to deprive you of your sword."

"I make no pledge—give no promise."

"Your Highness must then be treated as the others. Richelieu, you will receive monseigneur's sword."

Richelieu stepped forwards, but Condé said coldly:—

"You mistake, monsieur, a Prince cannot surrender his sword to an unfrocked friar, and," he looked at Achon, "still less to a priest."

Richelieu bit his lips with anger, but Achon smiled again, his cynical, mocking smile, and turned to me.

"Monsieur de Vibrac! There can be no higher honour than to receive the surrender of a Bourbon. I confer it upon you for your services—will you have the goodness to take His Highness's sword? It will make us quits on the score of Ponthieu—and other things."

The devilish malignity of the man stunned me. I could say nothing, but stood there like a stone. Every eye was fixed upon me; and then Achon continued, in his cold, measured voice:—

"Monseigneur! You look as if you thought me mad. Let me tell you that I am only paying a traitor his account. Every detail of the plan for your escape was disclosed to us by your good friend there—ask him to deny it if he can."

"It is impossible—it is an infamous lie!" exclaimed Condé, and there arose a buzz of astonishment and amaze. I stood transfixed, shaking in every limb, my coward heart almost dead within me.

"Look at him!" repeated Achon, and then a figure ran out from the group behind the Princess, and Yvonne de Mailly, her eyes blazing, her voice shrill, stood before me.

"Say it is a lie!" she said. "Say it is a lie!"

There are things the mind feels and knows to be true, instinctively. I lifted my head, and looked into the girl's hot eyes, and read there, in that moment, what, had I not been a blind fool, I might have known a year before. And she, she as she met my gaze, saw too, and it was something that paled her to the lips, something that made her cower and shrink back from me. Her woman's heart had told her what I was, and with a smothered cry she threw her arms up, and burst into peal after peal of mirthless laughter.

PART XIII.

CHAPTER XXII.

"NOTRE HOMME EST CROQUÉ."

WHEN an overwhelming disaster befals one, when the whole ship of one's life founders hopelessly, it is perhaps decreed in mercy that the full horror of the thing cannot be realised at the moment it happens. Little by little it breaks in upon the understanding, and it is only when the mind gains strength to endure that it has the power to realise.

At least, so it was with me. I can only judge from myself, and I have but a dim and vague recollection of those minutes, which were to me the most terrible of my life. There was a sound as of the sea roaring in my ears. The room seemed to enlarge to infinite space, and the crowd multiply itself to countless thousands, all watching me, and in the long vista of faces there was but one look on each and every countenance, an unutterable scorn, an unspeakable contempt. My strength was shrivelled to nothing, my courage gone to the four winds. Above all, a voice of agony ringing through a storm, came those peals of pitiful, mad laughter. God grant I may never hear the like again! Every second of that horror stretched to a year. I turned a hunted, appealing eye from face to face, but a mist seemed to gather before me, until at last I caught Achon's glance, and the malign fire in it, the mocking sneer in his look, shook the weight from my soul. I sprang at him, but he was quick, and stepped back, though with a blue scar on his face where my hand had touched him. Then those surrounding us flung themselves on me, and there was a quick, fierce struggle, for I fought like a mad thing. They bore me down by the force of numbers; but still as I struggled, and a sword was pointed to thrust me through, I heard a woman's voice cry: "In mercy spare him!" But it was not that appeal that gave me my life, and saved me from the death I sought. It was Achon himself who stayed the trooper's hand.

"Bear him out, and bind him securely," he said; and then, as he looked down upon me, his thin fingers at the mark on his cheek, and the cruel snarl of a cat on his lips, he added: "We have not done with you yet, monsieur—you must be paid your price in full."

Some shred of dignity still remained with me. I made no answer to the man, struggled no more, but rose sullenly without a word, and let them drag me into the open. There one loosed the reins from a horse, and they bound me with them like a thief, my hands behind my back. With two men guarding me, I stood thus in view of all, whilst the others were brought out, and the troop formed around them. Perhaps in pity for me, they did not look; but the very sight of those whom I had betrayed brought an agony on me, and I strained at the thongs at my wrists.

"Unbind me," I said hoarsely, through blue lips. "I will not attempt escape; I pledge my honour."

And the troopers broke into coarse laughter at my words, whilst Truchepot, the man who had taken my sword, mocked me to his fellows.

"He pledges his honour," he said. "Monsieur would perhaps like his sword returned to him, to wear as the Prince is wearing his."

Whereat they laughed again, and I bit my lip in silence; and then there was some one standing before me, some one who had heard my appeal and its answer, and I hung my head in shame and utter abasement. It was Marie.

"May God forgive you," she said, and with a divine pity in her voice she added, "as I do."

I did not dare meet her look, but half-turned away with a groan; yet something in the scene stilled the gibing tongues of the troopers, and they pressed between us in rough kindliness, so surrounding me that for the moment I was hidden from view.

I was mounted on a spare horse. Perhaps it was one that had belonged to the dead Badehorn—I cannot say—and with a trooper on my left holding the reins, and one on my right, a cocked pistol in his hand, I was put almost in the rear of the party. Then followed a few quick commands, the trumpets pealed, and we were on the way back to Orleans. We went at a smart trot, for it was evidently the intention of our captors to reach the city ere sundown, and, bright as the day had become, the lights of sunset were already showing in the west.

Of the other prisoners I could see nothing except Coqueville, and he rode almost immediately before me, but with this difference, that his hands were free and his horse not led. I do not know why, but I kept watching him with a strange fascination as he rode on, apparently in the deepest dejection, his head held down between his shoulders. I knew his mount, too. It was his own mare, Lisette, and she also seemed to be possessed with the same despair as her master, for she lagged and hung back, until we in the rear almost rode over her quarters. But notwithstanding this, she still kept going slower and more slowly, her tail switching nervously to and fro, and her ears laid back over her head. Seeing this, the men on each side of Lisette exchanged some rough joke about feminine temper, and closed in on Coqueville, forcing his nag on. And then I noticed that his left foot was out of the stirrup, and stretching his leg outwards with a quick, rapid motion, he spurred the trooper's horse next to him. It swerved slightly, leaving a space between them. Quick as thought Coqueville touched Lisette on the neck with the flat of his hand, and, obeying the signal, she slung half-round, and lashed out. There was a curse and a heavy fall as the stricken horse lurched downwards with its leg broken, and we behind had to rein up sharply, to avoid riding on those in front. In the momentary confusion caused by this, a little space was left clear for Coqueville. It was but a flash, a second of time that he had. But he took it, and as the kicked horse fell, he lifted Lisette's head, dashed through the opening into the wood and vanished.

In a moment there was a wild hubbub of kicking, plunging horses around us. The man next to me vainly fired his pistol after the fugitive, and two or three of the troopers rode after him in headlong pursuit. The whole line halted, and Richelieu galloped up, white with rage. He saw at a glance what had happened, and a short inquiry told him who had escaped.

"Here, Poltrot!" he exclaimed to a sergeant, "take half a dozen men and bring him back, dead or alive, and a hundred crowns are yours."

"You might make it five hundred with safety. You will never have to pay. The Orléanais is not long enough to give you time to catch Lisette."

It was Condé who spoke, but Richelieu made no answer, except that his cheek grew paler, and he drew a pistol from his holster. The men whom he had detached were gone, but the trooper whose horse had fallen stood a little apart on the road side, staring stupidly at his beast, which lay there in mute suffering. Richelieu turned to the man, and looked at him; and as I watched, helpless and tied, his face seemed transformed—his eyes burned, his lips were drawn back over teeth like those of a snarling wolf. At last he spoke, in a voice that shook with rage:—

"Was it you, Le Brun, who let the prisoner escape?"

"My horse was kicked, Captain, and I—I fell," stammered the man, and again came a laugh and a mocking cry from the Prince.

"*Bon coq*, Coqueville!"

The words seemed to drive the savage to madness. He glanced behind him with an oath, and then lifting his pistol pointed it at Le Brun.

The man threw up his hands with a cry that changed to a sob, for there was a sharp report, and the wretch, spinning round, fell to the shot, all huddled in a heap beside his horse. Slowly the monk put the smoking pistol back into his holster. His eye fell on the troopers near him, and they shrank at his look, cowed by the sullen ferocity of his glance.

Then he called to one of the men.

"Put this horse out of pain, and follow us—march!"

It may have been part of the iron discipline by which a ferocious soldiery was kept in order, but it was murder all the same, murder as foul and cruel as ever was wrought by a human tiger in the face of God's day. And now I began to realise what manner of man this was whom men called "The Monk," and the stories I had heard of him came back to me. How he was destined for the Church. How his fierce and turbulent soul scorned the black robe and longed for the sword. He fled from his convent. Caraffa, the legate of the Holy See, relieved him of his vows, and no more reckless cavalier fought through the Italian war. He returned, a merciless soldier, a fit instrument for the dark designs of those who sought to kill the faith with the sword. But the cup of his wickedness was brimming over, and the day of vengeance not far when he, too, was to die by an assassin's hand. I often wonder if any thought of poor Le Brun ever flashed before the glazing eyes of Richelieu, that bleak January night, when he lay poniarded, and dying like a dog, on the pavement of the Rue des Lavandières.

We rode on, the men in an awestruck silence, and even I forgetful of myself in the horror of the thing that had happened. And yet, swift and awful as Le Brun's fate was, it was merciful to that which every day men, women, children, yea! even babes, had to suffer in the years of the War of the Religions. The times had turned men's hearts to stone, and life, the life God gave us, was of less value than the dust beneath our feet. But I was not then old enough to be callous, and I never became so. The long years of my seclusion have prevented me from being hardened to scenes like these. And as I thought of Richelieu and his terrible deed I began to see how far, how irrevocably, I had fallen. Black as his shield was, it was starred by the fires of a dauntless courage. Cruel as he was, his word was inviolate, and there were times, too, when no knight of old could have borne himself more gallantly. None knew that better than I. And I shivered and shrunk in my soul with the cowardice of guilt as I thought how even he, evil amongst the evil, had turned from me in contempt and loathing.

So I rode on, my bitter thoughts preventing me feeling all pain from my bonds, my own self-reproach making me callous to the scorn that was ever and again glanced at me, and the tramp of hoofs, the jingle of chain-bits, and the clank of scabbards made a sad accompaniment to the riot in my mind.

At last, a few minutes after sunset, in the brief interval when the winter twilight hung before the grey of the night, we reached the city gates. They were shut, but the officer on guard, the same Italian whom we had met when Marcilly and I entered Orleans, opened them as we came up, and a short conversation ensued between him and the leaders of our party. At first I could hear nothing; but as the prisoners were massed up, I was brought close to the speakers, and saw that Achon's face was clouded and full of misgiving.

"Four couriers, did you say, Carandini?"

"Monsieur—and there are already some on the part of the Constable who have reached the palace. 'Tis said that he himself lies just outside the Portereau."

Then a word or two were exchanged in low tones between Richelieu and Achon, and the former called a subaltern officer.

"Carouges—take half the men, and escort the Princess and her suite to the Jacobins. You will keep them under careful guard. There must be no time allowed for leave-takings. We look after the others."

The order was obeyed to the letter; not but that Marie obtained a moment's speech with Achon.

"Monsieur," she said, "I pray you let me join my husband. The favour I ask is so small. In mercy grant it."

And he looked at her with a cruel light in his eye, whilst the mark that my hand had made on his face seemed to grow darker, as he said:—

"You will join him later on, madame—he is in the arms of the Holy Office".

The pitiless meaning of his words was clear as daylight. She gave a little gasp and strove to speak, but speech would not come to her, and then I found voice, and saved her from humbling herself in vain at the feet of the priest.

"Ah, madame! Ask him nothing—beg not from him!"

Simple as the words were, they steadied her, and gave her the strength she needed. She lapsed into a proud, cold silence, and reined back, whilst Achon bent towards me.

"You, too, are of those whom the Office needs; but before it touches you, monsieur ——" he paused, and his hand passed over his cheek, ere he continued, "I will deal with you, and after that you will bless the rack and the estrapade when they come".

I laughed back at him in reckless scorn as he turned away; and then we divided into two parties—I being placed with the one in which Condé was, and that headed straight for the house in the Rue Parisis.

We were closely guarded. The troopers hemmed us in, so that we could barely see anything, except the men around us; but, nevertheless, in the glances I shot to the right and to the left, I was aware that there was a strange commotion in the streets. As we rode on, there were voices raised in angry murmurs, and all around us there was a humming as of bees. Richelieu saw this, and doubled his precautions, riding close to Condé's side himself, and Achon's face became graver and graver as he went onwards. Near the Martroi, which I passed with shuddering horror, we came across a party of the Queen's guards, with Lorgnac at their head; and by his side—I could scarce believe my eyes—was Ponthieu.

They were coming towards us, but whether by accident or design I cannot tell. They filled the road, scarce leaving us room to pass. Seeing this, Richelieu called out in a loud voice:—

"Way! Way for the prisoners of the King!"

Lorgnac gave a sharp order to his men, calling them aside; but the crowd heard "The Monk's" words, and began to murmur, whilst Ponthieu, reckless as ever, raised a shout of "Bourbon, Notre Dame!" In a moment the mob caught up the cry, and it passed from mouth to mouth.

At the time Achon was quite close to Ponthieu, and he turned on the Gascon fiercely.

"You shall smart for this. I know you," and a gibing answer came back to him:—

"I have not the like honour, monsieur, yet I have given a livre for masses for the souls of your dead guards ——" and what more he would have said it is impossible to say; for here Lorgnac cut him short, seizing his reins and forcing him back, as he waved us on:—

"Pass, gentlemen! We give way to the King's prisoners."

And as we went on, the guardsman and Richelieu exchanged glances that crossed each other like two sword blades.

It was a narrow affair, and escaped but by a hair in ending in bloodshed. That something of import had happened I was sure now; but as yet I could not tell what it was, and neither Achon nor Richelieu knew, too, though they guessed that trouble was afoot, and a pistol barrel gleamed in the latter's hand, where he rode almost boot to saddle with the Prince. And so, on we rode, through the darkening streets, and at last we were again before the prison. Here, as elsewhere, a mob that grew in numbers each moment had gathered, as if expecting our coming; but whether it was the persuasive force in the muzzles of "the Emperor's Pistols," which leered down upon them from the walls, or whether the crowd was simply in a sullen, speechless mood, I know not. All I do know is that there was neither cry nor shout as they passed; but a murmuring that rose and sank, to rise and fall once more, like the distant voice of the sea on a level shore.

And now we halted before the gates. The trumpets pealed out loudly, and the huge doors groaned back in opening, disclosing the courtyard lined with armed men, whilst De Bresy and Comminges stood in the archway.

"You have them?" asked the former, eagerly; and Richelieu answered briefly:—

"All but Coqueville".

As he spoke both De Bresy and Comminges saw me, and the former said with a somewhat forced laugh:—

"So it is my turn again, monsieur. This time you will find it no jest;" but Achon answered him, not I, saying chilly:—

"He belongs to the Holy Office, monsieur, and to none else beside."

De Bresy remained silent, and with this we entered. In the courtyard there was a little bustle as we dismounted, and awaiting my fate, I looked around me in stony apathy. Then, moved perhaps by the same impulse that sometimes makes a stag, wounded to death, nibble at the grass around it, I cast my eyes on the sunset, and the strangeness of it held and arrested me, in spite of myself. There was a broad red sash of light across the west, that cut abruptly, and without any gradations of tint, into the sombre grey of the sky. Against this weird background rose the brown and purple silhouettes of the houses, the white and glistening spires of Ste. Croix, and the grim keep of the palace, the royal standard flaunting from the staff. Even as I looked it seemed to slip down a little with a jerk, and then fluttered slowly down to half-mast height. No one noticed this. All were busily engaged, and Richelieu, Achon and the others were in earnest converse. Achon was urging something, a desperate resolve on his face; but De Bresy shook his head, his hand to the hilt of his sword, and Comminges said loudly:—

"No! It would be murder. We are not here for that."

Whereat Richelieu put his hand on the priest's shoulder, saying: "Let it rest. 'Tis but a matter of hours." Then, as if to end the colloquy, he turned to the guards, saying sharply:—

"Bring on the prisoners!"

It was then that Condé looked at me for the first time since the discovery of my shame. "He!" he said. "And with me!"

"No, monseigneur," Achon answered, "with me—he remains in my sight from now," and his hand once more touched his bruised cheek.

So, guarded and still bound, I was taken with them, as the Prince was led back to his old prison. In the landing at the end of the corridor I was stopped.

"Let him be kept here until I come back," said Achon. "See that he does not escape you!"

And the troopers on each side of me smiled grimly in answer. The fate of Le Brun was too recent to allow them to forget their vigilance. With a parting look at me, Achon followed the others into the room, and the door being open, I was enabled to see and hear what passed.

As the Prince stepped in, Vaux, who was still there, came forwards with hanging head and tears in his eyes; but Condé, who took no notice of his captors, embraced him, saying kindly:—

"Come, Vaux! 'Tis the fortune of war," and then he looked at the card table where Vaux had rebuilt his house of cards. He touched it with his fingers, and as it crumbled on the table, he laughed as he turned to De Bresy:—

"Dreams of our youth — eh, De Bresy?" And then, with a perfect coolness, he went on, taking a seat at the table, "The long ride has tired me, and I need a rest. Come, De Bresy! Play me a rubber."

"I am at your Highness's commands," and De Bresy, taking a place opposite to the Prince, rapidly shuffled the cards. They were cut to him, and he dealt out two hands amidst a wondering silence. Vaux had slunk to the window, and the Prince completely ignored the presence of Achon and Richelieu. As for Comminges, he was at the door near me, and I heard him mutter under his breath:—

"Ay! He is brave."

"The old stakes?" The Prince was laughing as he spoke.

"Your Highness."

"You lose, De Bresy. I would put my life on this hand."

"Monseigneur!" It was Achon's harsh voice that broke in upon them, and Condé looked up, a cold inquiry in his eyes.

"Monseigneur!" the bishop went on, "I have that to tell you which admits of no delay ——" He stopped, the unspoken words still on his lips, for the deep boom of a heavy gun fell upon our ears, and from outside there was a shouting from ten thousand throats.

"The Constable! Long live the Constable!" and louder and yet more loud came another cry, "Long live Condé! The Prince is saved!"

De Bresy almost rose from his seat, but the Prince bade him play on, paying no heed to the cries, and half-turning his back on Achon. Richelieu and Comminges had dashed from the room, and for once Monsieur of Arles stood irresolute and amazed. The suspense lasted but for a moment. There came another shout and the tramp of hurrying feet. It was Richelieu returning with a pale face, but around and behind him were other figures. There was Cipierre, his grim face beaming; there was another who came with halting steps of pain, but his eye was bright, and there was a flush of joy on the cheek of the great Chancellor of France. There were others I cannot name, but as Richelieu hurried to Achon's side and whispered something in his ear, something that turned his cheeks to ashes, there was a joyous shout of "*Bourbon, Notre Dame!*" and Ponthieu came through the crowd. He pressed to the Prince's side, and, leaning over the table, said low, but still loud enough for me to hear:—

"*Notre homme est croqué*—the King is dead."

Condé looked up quietly. Then he turned to De Bresy and spread his cards face upwards on the table, saying with a smile:—

"You see—I hold four aces".

The next minute the room was filled and the passage choked with men. On all sides I heard the words, "The King is dead!" "The Constable is at the gates!" All around me were the men of the Queen's guards; the others had gone. There was a face there I knew well, and as yet the man there did not know my shame. It was Lorgnac, and as our eyes met he stepped to my side, his poniard in his hand. With two or three quick cuts he freed me, and then shook me by the hand.

"It is all over with them," he said, with a smile. "You are safe now."

PART XIV.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE AFTERMATH.

I MADE no answer to Lorgnac, but stood for a moment incapable of thought or action; hardly, indeed, realising that I was free from my shameful bonds. Around me was a sea of faces, and I felt as if all eyes were upon me, although in the gloom one could scarce see a sword's point ahead. All that could be discerned was a confused crowd of shadows, with here and there the flash of a breastplate, or the gleam of a steel cap, as they caught and reflected some lingering ray of light. The thronged room beyond was, however, in brightness. Some one had lit the lamps there, and from where I was leaning against the wall I could see an ever-changing crowd pressing round the spot where Condé stood. High words were passing, too, and there was a veiled threat in the Chancellor's voice, as, leaning his shaking limbs on his crutches, he turned on Achon in answer to some speech made by the bishop.

"Monsieur! There is no lieutenant-general of the kingdom now. That office died with the late King."

"And I demand Marcilly's release." It was Condé's voice that cut in, and Achon answered sullenly:—

"You must ask for him from the Holy Office, and its hold is firm."

"But he shall be freed, or you, Monsieur of Arles, will answer for it." And now I could wait to hear no more. My scattered senses were recovering themselves. I could not linger until all knew my shame, and this they would know soon enough, for such things travel like lightning from mouth to mouth. Lorgnac was still near to me. He still believed me to be a man of honour. He would help me once more, and bending forwards I said to him:—

"Monsieur! Can you get me out of this? I—I must go."

He nodded and smiled. Then putting his arm through mine he led me along the passage into the courtyard. None dared to hinder him. Even if they had dared, they could have done nothing, for everywhere around us were the Queen's guards. The gates, too, were no longer kept by the archers, but by grim-looking men in a strange uniform of sombre black.

"They are the gendarmes of Aunis," said Lorgnac, as we passed the gates. "And now, adieu! I suppose I shall see you to-morrow at the palace, in the Prince's suite."

I took the hand he held out to me for a moment, and muttering my thanks, turned hastily and mingled with the crowd on the pavement, leaving Lorgnac staring after me in astonishment at my abrupt departure.

In a crowd one is soon lost, and in the uncertain light it would have required sharp eyes to have recognised me, as I threaded my way through the heaving throng. Not that I gave a thought to recapture. My mind was absorbed with one idea, and that was to put miles between me and the scene of my shame. For the moment I was tortured by neither remorse nor fear. I seemed dead to all sensations. All that I wanted was to quit Orleans.

Finally I reached a street that was still in quietness, and halted under a lamp set in the wall of a house above the image of the Virgin. I looked around me. There were but few people stirring here, but some shops were open, and one of these, almost opposite to me, was a place where I saw that I might renew my apparel to some extent, and perhaps get another sword. My purse was still with me, and it was heavy enough, for I was rich in the world's goods. I determined to act at once; so, crossing the road, I went into the shop and purchased what I wanted—a stout, serviceable sword and a good cloak. The shopkeeper tried to enter into converse with me about the events of the day, the death of the King, and other things, but I cut him short, and paying him his money, stepped out into the street. Once there, I walked on at a brisk pace towards the city gates. No one attempted to stop me, and passing through, I gained the river shore, and looked out for a ferry boat, but there was not one in sight. I stood for a little, straining my eyes into the night. The moonlight fell soft and clear on the long quay, and on the slow,

Collection Of Late Abdul Haq Burg Srinagar.

creeping river before me. Behind me was the city, and the hum of voices joined itself to the dreamy lapping of the Loire at my feet. On the opposite bank of the river the night lights of a few boats were burning, and farther still twinkled a long chain of camp fires, marking the spot where the Constable lay. Thrice I hailed a boatman, calling loudly, but there was no reply, and I heard nothing except the hum from the city behind, and the whisperings of the stream before me. Seeing at last it was useless to waste time here, I turned to the left, and followed the river face, hoping to come across a boat, but with no results. Finally I stopped again and looked around. Yes! There was no doubt of it. I was close to the spot where Caillaud had suffered his martyrdom, on the day of our entry into Orleans. The scaffold was still there, the stacks of wood, not completely used, near it, and perhaps the ashes of the fire were still warm. I stepped up to the scaffold, and as I did so, a homeless dog rose from behind the wood, and with a quick, short bark at me, fled into the shivering night. From the distance I heard him howling, and my heart sank within me as I thought how even a dog had fled in terror at my approach, a dog to whom I meant no harm.

There as I stood near the scaffold, my mind was again full of bitter thoughts, of useless self-reproach, of hopeless sorrow. I looked towards the river. It moved so calmly. It was so still and deep. Under its placid surface perhaps there would be peace. Better death than this torment in my soul. I made a step towards it, but whether it was cowardice or not, I cannot say; but I stayed myself, and then that hope which never dies flickered once more in my heart. Perhaps I could retrieve myself. If not, surely there was another death yet left to me to die? Not this! I moved back again near the scaffold, and, seating myself on the pile of wood, began to think; but my brain seemed stricken with palsy. All that flamed before my mind, in endless scrolls of fire, was the thought of my infamy. I rose again, but a mist seemed to gather before me. There was a drumming in my ears, and, tottering forwards, I clung to the scaffolding to save myself from falling. With my hands clenched to the hoardings, I stood shaking in every limb, and then I suppose I must have fainted. I seemed to be dropping, dropping through endless space, amidst the turmoil and din of chaos, amidst the unearthly mowings of devils rejoicing at my fall. Then all became blank oblivion. Slowly, slowly I came to myself, and, after a minute or so, gathered strength to stand without the support of the hoardings. I wiped my forehead, which, cold as it was, was damp with sweat, and once more looked around. It was evident that the excess of my mental torture had broken my strength, and strength I must have to go. I determined to retrace my steps, obtain some food, and then risk swimming the Loire, if necessary, to get out of Orleans. I found myself, soon after, in the Rue des Tanneurs, and finally reached a little square just beyond St. Pierre le Puellier, in the corner of which stood a cabaret of some pretensions. Obscure as the square was, cold as the night was, there were numbers of people about, and as I peered into the cabaret, I saw that it was all but full. Every gossip, every babbler, every idler who had a brown piece in his pocket, was spending it in Vouvray, in Rochecorbon, or in Cognac, whilst he talked over the news. I entered quietly, and seeing in a corner a small vacant table, settled myself there, and ordered some food and a bottle of wine. The food I could barely touch, although I forced myself to eat a little; but the wine warmed me, and I began to recover my faculties, and also gained some of that courage that liquor gives to the weakest.

Up to now I had taken no notice of the company assembled, but as I leaned back and glanced around, I saw, at a table not four paces from me, a half-dozen men seated together drinking and gossiping. Imagine my astonishment on seeing amongst them Brusquet, the jester, and Carouges, the officer of carabiniers, who had been placed in charge of the escort that was to conduct the Princess of Condé to her prison in the Jacobin priory. Brusquet, I was aware, knew me, and Carouges—had he not been a witness to that awful scene at St. Loup?

They were between me and the door, else I had gone out. As it was I had to wait, trusting that their preoccupation, and the shadow in which I sat, would prevent them from recognising me, and resolved to take the first convenient opportunity to depart. And so as I sat I became a compulsory listener to their talk. I caught Carouges' voice at the end of a sentence.

"Faith of a gentleman! I never saw a man look so, and hope never to see one again. If ever coward and villain was stamped on a man's face it was on Vibrac's."

"And yet," said another, whom I knew not, "there are those who refuse to believe the story ——," but Carouges interrupted him, saying a little haughtily:—

"Monsieur de Quesnay, I was there, and he owned to it, the cur!"

"*Hein!*" And Brusquet flapped the bladder attached to his sceptre on the table, "*Hein!* But Vibrac only illustrates what I was always telling my little brother Francis, God rest his soul."

"And that was?" asked two or three voices.

"That ambition and love will ruin the best man. My cousins of Guise illustrate the first, and in Vibrac we have the proof of the second."

"Mention them not in the same breath," exclaimed Carouges, and the jester answered, waving his sceptre up and down:—

"*Oui-da!* Vibrac was a good enough sword in the Spanish war, and in the Milanese. No! No! I know more than you about this, Carouges, but, of your grace, pass the Milan cheese—I am not yet thirsty enough."

He helped himself to some cheese to whet his thirst, and, filling his goblet, raised it to his lips. Whilst he drank Quesnay took up the talk.

"But the other—Marcilly—he has not escaped, has he?"

"No," said Carouges; "he dies to-morrow."

My heart began to beat, and Brusquet, putting down his glass, stared at Carouges.

"Come, Carouges, you jest. Vibrac has escaped, and all the other prisoners are free."

"I see, my King of the Cap and Bells, that there are some things you do not know. Yes, Marcilly has sinned against the Holy Office, and he dies to-morrow on the Martroi, an hour after sunrise."

There was silence for a moment, and I strained my ears to catch each word. Then Brusquet asked:—

"How do you know? Are you sure?"

Carouges shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I command the guards at the scaffold," he said. Whereupon the men became silent once more, sipping their wine, and looking at one another.

"*Diable!*" said one. "What will come next?"

"A decree of the Court of Requests, granting the forfeited lands of Chaumont and Duras to that loyal servant of the King, that faithful shepherd of his flock, Achon, Abbot of St. Savin, Bishop of Arles, and Archbishop designate of Sens."

With that the jester rose as if to go, but Quesnay pulled at his cloak.

"Sit down," he said, "and give us a song—our blood runs blue with this talk."

But Brusquet shook his head, whilst his strange, wrinkled face seemed to become more and more sharp and acute, as he pointed in the direction of the palace, where the dead King lay, and his voice shook a little as he answered:—

"Not to-night. There is some one lies there who loved to listen to me, and who will listen no more; but he is still too near for me to sing."

So saying, he flung a couple of gold pieces on the table, and, turning, stepped out of the room. He was followed by the others. Outside I heard their voices for a moment in laughing converse, and then they were gone.

And I—I sat there, my head buried in my bosom, burning with remorse, half-mad with the tortures of memory. Marcilly was to die with to-morrow's light. The words seemed to hiss in my ears, and I—I had slain him with a Judas' kiss. Oh! I had got my revenge—but where was its sweetness? I had plucked my Dead Sea fruit, and the ashes of it were sere and bitter in my mouth. I called for some Cognac, and sought to obtain a temporary release from my mental tortures in the disgraceful oblivion of the drunken; but the fiery spirit had no more effect upon me than if it had been water.

Sitting still became intolerable, so paying my account, I went out again into the night. I sought the city gates once more, but they were closed, and, with a curse, I turned and retraced my steps. I was caged in Orleans for the night. I again approached the cabaret, and stood hesitating at the door. Then the thought of the conversation I had overheard came upon me, and I turned away and hastened onwards, going I did not know where—and, indeed, I cared not. With the tireless persistence of a madman, I walked for hours through street and square and alley. I walked fast, seeking to weary myself, taking no notice of anything, and must have made the circuit of the city at least twice.

It was late now. The hum of voices, the bustle of tramping feet had died away, and I was alone on those grey roads, that stretched, wound, turned and twisted in all directions around me. Above floated the moon in a cloudless sky, serene and stately, and under its ivory light I plodded on, feverish and tireless, until at last I came to a halt near the cloisters at the back of Ste. Croix.

I looked about me. In that shivering light all was silent and still. Pure and white above me towered the temple of the Holy Rood, and to the right the black mass of the palace loomed against the sky, a phantom castle of cloudland. From two windows of the keep lights were burning like twin stars. It was there they kept the death-watch of the King. It was there that the King's Peace had come upon him, whose white lips had offered it to us that night when we stood by his bedside. For a space I watched the windows, and then moved hastily onwards. The curse of Cain was upon me and I could not rest. But now my strength began to give way, and the tremendous exertions of the past hours to tell upon me. I held on, however, passing through the labyrinth of streets beyond the cloisters, and drew up once more, utterly tired out, on the edge of a deserted and barren stretch of ground, covered here and there with the castaway rubbish of building materials. Across this waste was a small row of ruined houses. They had been gutted by fire, and the blackened and charred walls stood starkly up before me. Here, at any rate, was a refuge where I might lie securely till the morning, and stepping across the field, I slunk into the gaping doorway nearest to me, like a wolf seeking his lair, and, worn out and exhausted, sank down upon a heap of wreckage. But weary and broken though I was in body, my mind was awake, and the eternal self-torment ceased not for a moment. In my despair I dared to call upon God to have mercy upon me and ease me of my pain. I know not if that prayer ever reached beyond the moonlight. For a while I lay thus brooding, until my agony became once more intolerable, and hunted me from my place of rest. I rose on my elbow, when the sound of a sliding footstep, and the crumbling of stones came to me. and I waited, startled and expectant. Who was this other wanderer of the night that had sought the same dreary refuge as I had? Again I heard the footstep, slow and stealthy, but light withal. The noise came from within the house, and whoever it was must have entered before I had. Where I lay it was black shadow, but streaming through the door was a bright ribbon of moonlight, that stretched right in front of me, and over which the newcomer would have to pass. For a time there was a dead silence, then there was another cautious step, then another, and at last, with a light bound, a misshapen, ape-like figure leaped into the moonlight and stood glancing furtively around. Strange and monstrous indeed was the shape—the height that of a child, the body that of a man. The long, black, muscular arms, reaching below the knee, were bare. A tattered red cloak hung to his shoulders, and his head, from which two yellow eyes glared hideously, was bound up in a scarf that was wound round the jaws. For a breath I thought it was some goblin of the night, some evil spirit that stood before me in bodily presentment. Then the thing made a strange, cackling noise from its throat, and I knew it was Majolais.

And as I looked upon the dwarf a strange feeling, it was almost gladness, came upon me. Hideous, hardly human as he was, I had at least found one whom I knew, one who, in his own wild way, had shown a savage affection for me for little kindnesses done.

"Majolais!" I cried softly.

The dwarf started. His eyes flashed, as he crouched backwards, peering into the darkness, and the moonlight played on the shining blade of a dagger in his hand.

"Majolais! It is I — Vibrac," and rising I approached him, but he had already recognised my voice, and was at my feet, his frame trembling, his poor, dumb throat choked with sobs.

I let the fit pass him, patting him gently on the shoulder as if he were a dog, and for one brief moment, in the thought of another's sufferings, I forgot my own. We sat down together on a fallen rafter, where the moon fell brightly on us, and I tried to talk to him and to get him to explain, by signs if possible, how he had escaped from Achon; but though he understood me he could not explain to me. He unwound the scarf to show me his mutilated head, and on his body and upon his arms were the cruel wales of the lash. These he showed to me, moaning and gibbering, and at each mention of Achon's name he snarled like a tiger-cat.

I sat on a fallen rafter, Majolais crouching at my feet, and we talked for long. At least, I spoke, and gathered what I could from his signs and the broken sounds he made. At last the moon sank and the dark hours came. The dwarf drew the remnants of his cloak over his shoulders, and, curling himself up like a dog, fell asleep.

But there came no rest for me, and with burning eyes I sat staring through the darkness, where the black shadows took the form and substance of mocking devils, that flitted backwards and forwards, gibing at my fall. I had lost all. Wherever I went the shadow of my sin would dog my footsteps. I had diced for my soul with the fiend, and lost. Is there one who can win at that game?

Death! Yes, death offered its release; but I could not die by my own hand. It would set the seal to my infamy; and then, there was another life beyond the grave. I tried once more to pray for health and strength, but a feeling I could not restrain choked the words on my lips. For very shame I could not pray. I could not creep before God's throne to ask back what I had thrown away with both hands.

As I sat thus, Majolais shivered and moaned. Poor wretch! The cold struck him sorely, and removing my cloak, I cast it over him whilst he slept. I then drew my doublet closer together, and in doing so my fingers touched something soft. I took hold of it, and the faint fragrance of violets came to me. It was the remains of the little offering Yvonne de Mailly had made to me.

I removed the flowers and held them in my hand. They were soft, delicate, and pure as the girl's heart — and I — I had cast aside a priceless gem that lay at my feet, to wander after an elf-light that led me into the deeps. I put the flowers by carefully. They are with me to this day. Sometimes I open my cabinet and look at them, and as I gaze the withered blossoms seem to renew their freshness, and their sweet scent to come back to them. And then I shut them up again reverently, as things too sacred for the light.

Be this as it may, as I put aside the sad little gift there flickered once more within me a faint hope. A way was pointed to me to seek the death that I craved. There was something of honour in it. Yes, I would die by Marcilly's side. I could not save him; but I would try to, and the clean sword that I wore would be used for the first and last time by me in a manner worthy of its brightness. Strength came to me with the thought; and feverish and impatient, I watched the long hours steal past, until the time came for me to go. I heard the Lauds, and although it was still black darkness I could stay no longer. Stooping down, I shook Majolais by the shoulder. He awoke with a gasp and a start, but recovered himself at once, and as I resumed my cloak, he seized and kissed my hand, his hot lips burning like a seal. I told him I was going, and that he should, when it was light, seek the Princess of Condé, there he would find rest and safety; but Majolais clung to my cloak, and somehow made me understand that he would not be parted from me. So we two went out of our refuge.

Long and slow was our passage. We must have wandered in the darkness like derelict ships, but at last we reached the Martroi. The watch-fires were burning, and here and there was the gleam of a torch, or the flash of a light; for early as was the hour, dark as it was, there were those who had already assembled to see a fellow-creature die.

Aided by the darkness, we approached near the scaffold. Close to it were a series of wooden galleries, and, drawing my sword, I slipped behind one of these, and waited for the time to come—it would not be long now—when I should die sword in hand, and whiten, if only a little, my stained shield.

Majolais was beside me when I took my place. I saw his yellow eyes watching the sword, and, as if he understood, he drew his dagger and felt the point of it with his finger. But I had no intention of sacrificing him. I whispered to him to be gone. I told him in low, quick words what I meant to do; but he remained immovable. Finally, I threatened him angrily, but to no purpose, and I was about to resign myself to fate, when a sudden idea seemed to possess him. He chuckled like a night-jar, and, drawing himself up the hoardings, he crept along them on all fours with cat-like agility, and vanished in the darkness. I was glad he was gone. He knew where to go to for safety, and this business of mine had to be done alone.

And now the sky began to whiten, and night-fire and torch to pale at the coming day. From all hands there was a murmur and hum of voices. Ghostly figures swarmed in the galleries, and the tramp of feet echoed from every side of the square. Slowly the day brightened, the hum and bustle increased, whilst sometimes one heard a laugh or a cry, a rough oath or a ribald jest, rise above the buzz of voices.

The block was not ten paces from me, and on the opposite side was a gallery, with a balcony draped in velvet; but it was as yet unoccupied. Suddenly there came the tramp of horses' hoofs, the clash of arms, a sharp order or two, and the space round the scaffold was filled with armed men, who were so close to me, that from where I stood in concealment, I could have touched the nearest with my hand. I heard Carouges' voice, and then a figure stepped from his side and mounted the platform of the scaffold. It was a masked man, robed all in black, with a long, two-handed sword over his shoulder. He stood by the block, leaning on the cross-hilt of his sword, and so absorbed was I in watching him, that I fairly started as I felt a cold hand on mine, and looking down beheld Majolais. I signed to him to go, but for answer he pointed between the slits of the boards towards the gallery opposite to us. It was occupied now, and the malign countenance that looked out thence upon the morning was that of Achon. The dwarf's face was like that of a devil; and then he suddenly and swiftly backed from me, and was gone once more. I leaned forwards and watched, and as I did so, the faint odour of something burning struck me. I glanced behind, but could make out nothing, and my attention was taken off by Carouges, as he spoke to another who stood by his side, wrapped in a long cloak.

"Are none of the Court coming? Is only he to be here?" Carouges made a movement of his hand towards Achon, and it was Richelieu who answered him.

"Oh! There are many in the galleries, but no royalties. They respect the dead King. However, Monsieur of Arles, though he sits there alone, is a host in himself."

"Faith! If a host, he gives his guest a gruesome banquet," laughed the other, and then this idle talk was interrupted by a murmur from the crowd that swelled to a roar, and then died away again in a deathlike silence.

"He comes!" said Richelieu in a low voice, and I tightened my grip on my sword, and measured the distance for my rush to the scaffold.

The silence still continued. The crowd seemed to be spell-bound; and now the awful music of the death-hymn fell upon our ears, and all strained forwards, eager and expectant. Slowly the chant came, nearer and yet more near, louder and louder grew the solemn voices, and I could catch each word of that song of praise to the Most High, misused so blasphemously by those who called themselves His priests:—

Quæso Christe rex invicte,
Tu succurre misero,
Sub extrema mortis hora
Quum jussus abiero,
Nullum in me jus tyranno
Præbeatur impio.

I could hear the sad words but could see nothing, except that Achon had arisen, his white hands clasping the balustrade before him, and his eyes peering downwards in the direction of the voices. He looked, as he stood, like some obscene bird of prey watching for his quarry to come within striking distance. There was a movement amongst the soldiers, who parted to make room for the doomed man, and then two by two the mournful procession came into sight, the monks before and behind the prisoner, chanting the last verse of the hymn. As they passed the gallery beneath Achon they stopped for a moment, and he leaned forward like a stooping vulture to look at Marcilly, and at that moment the morning sun came out in glorious light, and with it a fresh breeze arose. The two, destroyer and victim, faced each other, a smile of infernal malice on Achon's face; Marcilly pale, but calm and proud. Then Achon made a slight gesture with his hand, the procession moved onwards, and I boldly stepped out of my concealment, and stood behind the soldiers. No one noticed me—all eyes were on the man who was about to die.

They had reached the death platform by this, the executioner had bowed to his victim, when suddenly a roar of fright and horror burst from the people, and dense volumes of smoke broke out from the galleries.

There was a wild shriek of "Fire! Fire!" There was a rushing and crowding of human beings like sheep. Achon turned an alarmed face towards the galleries, when, from beneath his own stand, a black cloud of smoke came up, and the next instant the hangings had caught fire, and he was enveloped in a circle of flame. For a moment the execution was stayed. The guard gathered round the prisoner, hiding him from view; and Richelieu, springing forwards, attempted to scale the steps leading to Achon's gallery, but fell back beaten and baffled by the smoke. The uproar was indescribable; but through it all my heart leaped as I heard the rattle of drums, and they were—my God! they were beating the *Rappel d'Aunis*. But even as I heard this, and others heard it too, we turned our eyes to the burning gallery where Achon was alone. The sunlight hid the flames, but now and then a warm orange flash showed where they worked, and puffs of black smoke went up in long spirals to the sky. The dry wood burnt merrily, the breeze fanned the fire, and within his burning cage Achon ran to and fro like a mad animal.

"Help! Help!" he shrieked. "Oh, God! Help!"

They would have given it if they could. Even I could not see him die like this, and, forcing my way somehow through the crowd, I tried to face the frail stairway, but ere I had gone four steps, the charred wood broke, and I fell heavily. As I rose to my feet, blackened and bruised, I saw Marcilly was safe. It was but a glance I gave; but it was enough, for Cipierre was beside him, and the black uniforms of the gendarmes of Aunis everywhere.

But for the moment all eyes were fixed on Achon. There were other and sadder things going on elsewhere in the burning square, for there the innocent were dying with the guilty; but here, where we were, this was what froze us with horror, and moved us all to pity. Ay, pity! though he whom God's hand was striking was the worst of men.

As yet the flames had not touched him, but leaped and danced around the wretch as though playing with him, as though they meant to let him die mentally a hundred deaths before the end came. Three times did he try to break through, and three times we saw his face, evil, white and despairing, as he fell back, howling curses.

And now there was a yell of horror from those around us, horror and terror unspeakable, and a monk, one of those who sang the death-hymn, cried out in a voice that rose shrill and high:—

"'Tis the devil! The devil come for him!"

Achon had again dashed to the flaming balustrade, but this time not alone. A black, misshapen thing was at his side, and two long black arms were wound round his neck. He struggled and cried out in a broken voice, and his glazed eyes shone with an awful terror, as he looked at the hideous face pressing close to his. Down they fell together, backwards, to reappear again after a breathless movement. They strove madly together. They were hardly human. So closely were they clenched, so grimed were they both by the smoke, that it was barely possible to distinguish the one from the other, and as they came to the edge of the balcony, where the burning balustrade had dropped away, their limbs writhed and worked, like those of some monstrous spider in an agony.

Beneath them was a hissing, seething pit of flame, and, balancing on that perilous ledge, they fought together mutely. Long arms of fire shot up to them from the blazing deep below, seeking to clutch them, and drag them down, but still they fought for the life that was already lost to both. For one brief moment I caught Achon's glance, and it froze me to stone, for he was looking through me, and the terror of that which lies beyond the grave, and who knows what besides, glared from his eyes.

No one spoke. No one stirred, but all watched and watched for the end. At last it came. For a breath the frightful pair swayed and tottered together, backwards and forwards, and then—fell, locked in their death-grip, into the flames beneath.

A shuddering cry went up from the crowd, and then all was still. Once we saw the dwarf, a dim figure, rise through the flames, and wave an arm wildly, and then he vanished in the roaring fire.

My tale is done. It is not for me to tell the history of the time, or to relate how the coming of the Constable gave a breath of peace to my afflicted land. It is sufficient for me to say that by the death of Achon the one enemy who would have troubled to harm me was removed. As for the others, those whom I had betrayed to their death, and whom God saved from their peril, they let me drop into oblivion. Here to my own halls of Vibrac did I return. Here have I hidden my shame. Here have I learnt to repent. Who shall know the hours of agony, the days, the years of penitence and bitter remorse that I have passed? No man! But there is One who knows, One at whose feet I have knelt and humbled myself with tears of blood; and He who despised not the thief on the cross will, perhaps, have mercy upon a broken and a contrite heart.

THE END.

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who would have troubled to